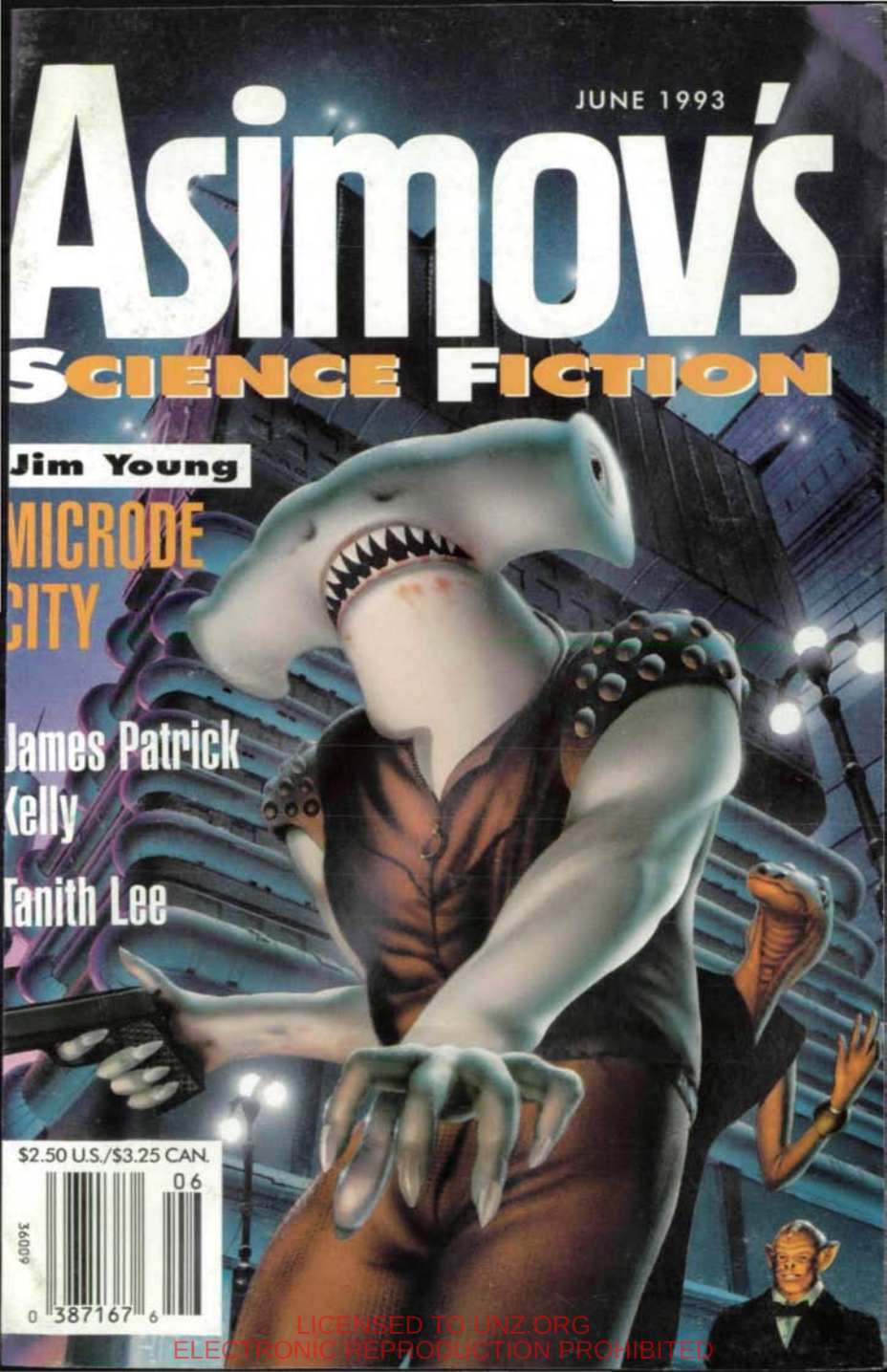

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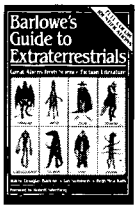

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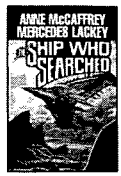

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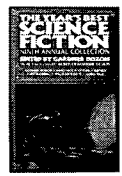

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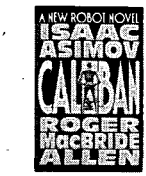

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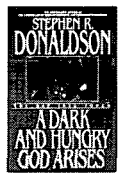

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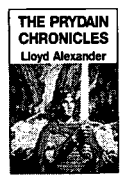

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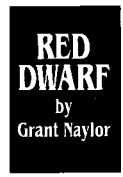

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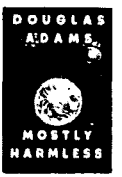

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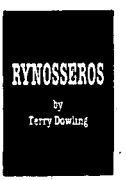

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Asimov's SCIENCE FICTION

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May 25, 1993

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Stories from *Asimov's* have won nineteen Hugos and nineteen Nebula Awards, and our editors have received eight Hugo Awards for Best Editor. *Asimov's* was also the 1992 recipient of the Locus Award for Best Magazine.

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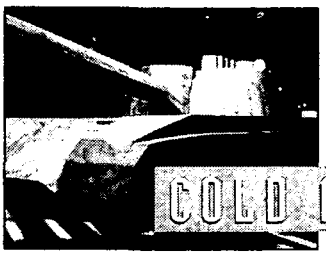

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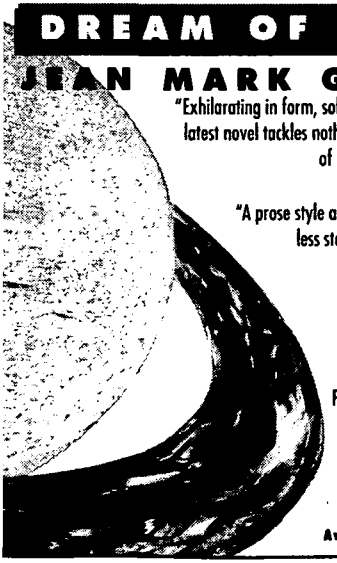

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GUEST EDITORIAL

ISAAC ASIMOV AWARD

by Sheila Williams

We are proud to announce the creation of the Isaac Asimov Award for the best unpublished science fiction or fantasy short story by an undergraduate. The winner will receive $500 from *Asimov's Science Fiction,* and the story will be considered for publication in the magazine. Our co-sponsor in this endeavor is the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts (IAFA).

The award is a tribute to the legacy of Isaac Asimov. Throughout his career, Isaac encouraged other writers while constantly introducing science fiction to an ever-widening audience. His magazine was founded for writers and readers, and it has always welcomed beginning authors as well as established ones.

IAFA is an organization that continues the tradition of exposing new people to fantastic literature. Its members are academics who teach creative writing and courses in fantasy and science fiction. They are actively engaged in opening up our field to a new generation of writers and readers.

It is singularly appropriate that an award sponsored by *Asimov's* and IAFA, and honoring Isaac Asimov, should be an award for brand new writers. Isaac Asimov sold his first science fiction stories in 1938 while attending Columbia College in New York City. In those days, there were no courses in science fiction and fantasy, no Clarion Writers' Workshop for fresh young writers, and no science fiction achievement awards at all. Yet science fiction magazines like *Amazing, Astounding, Thrilling Wonder Stories,* and many others flourished. Through them, Isaac discovered SF, and they were responsible for his avid interest and his initial success. A story's highest distinction was its acceptance by and publication in one of those periodicals.

A great deal has changed since 1938. Publication remains the goal of every author, but other forms of recognition now exist. A proliferation of awards honor today's stories and novels, many of them named for some of the field's most acclaimed authors. The most prestigious of these include the Theodore Sturgeon Award for best short story; the Philip K. Dick Award for best original paperback; the Arthur C. Clarke Award for best

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novel published in England; the James Tiptree, Jr. Award for best gender-bending fiction; the John W. Campbell, Jr. Award for most promising new writer; and, of course, the Hugo—named for Hugo Gernsback, it is given to the best fiction of the year. Once a deserving story is published, there seems to be no end to the recognition it and its author can hope to receive.

At the same time, competition for those publication slots has intensified. There are fewer SF and fantasy magazines than there were in the thirties and forties, and even the addition of original anthologies doesn't provide as many publishing opportunities as there were in the past. New writers are still sought out and encouraged—they are the lifeblood of the field—but it isn't easy to break in. The best make it, but many experience their share of disappointments along the way. Still, becoming a writer, and continuing to become a better one, is a challenging and exciting endeavor.

The Isaac Asimov Award is intended to applaud that excitement and enthusiasm, and to draw attention to today's talented newcomers. While other undergraduate writing awards exist, we believe this is the first to celebrate the science fiction or fantasy author. The award won't replace the professor or the writing workshop, but it may add some extra spice and encouragement to the writing process.

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award will not be limited to unpublished authors. All full-time undergraduate students attending accredited colleges or universities are eligible. Winners will be invited to IAFA's annual Conference of the Fantastic to receive their awards. This conference is held in mid-March in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

The deadline for entries in this year's contest is November 15, 1993. All submissions must be previously unpublished, and they should be from 1000 to 10,000 words long. Authors may submit an unlimited number of stories, but each manuscript must include the writer's name, address, and phone number. No submissions can be returned. Stories should be sent to:

Isaac Asimov Award
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The winner will be determined by the editors of *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine, but submissions should *not* be sent to our editorial offices. For guidelines, send a self-addressed stamped envelope to Rick Wilber, School of Mass Communications, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL 33620.

Science fiction is a literature of ideas, and fantasy stretches our imagination. *Asimov's* readers as a whole seem to be a group of open-minded people. They have to be —since they are constantly bombarded with new concepts, unrecognizable futures, alien environments, and the need to willingly suspend their disbelief. This is a trait shared with the young—and with students of any age—who are constantly making new discoveries about the world and challenging old assumptions. Though the Isaac Asimov Award is aimed at one specific group, it is part of a growing movement to expose more people—writers and readers, on campus and off—to this vital and stimulating realm of literature.

With his compassionate robots and galactic empire, Isaac Asimov gave many readers their first introduction to amazing new concepts. He inspired other writers to try their own hand at crafting science fiction. His love for the field, for the writers and the stories, was infectious. With this award we celebrate that love, pay tribute to a great writer, and tip our hats to the next generation. ●

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by Joe Haldeman

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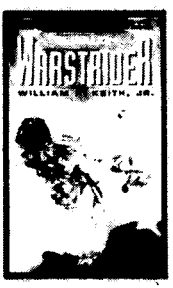

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by William H. Keith, Jr.

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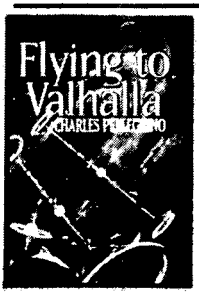

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LETTERS

Dear Gardner Dozois,

I quite agree with Norman Spinrad's high assessment of Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court,* the new Tor version of which he reviewed in the November *Asimov's*. However, in his review, Mr. Spinrad gives Twain credit for "inventing the modern time travel story." Close, but no cigar. Published in 1889, Twain's isn't even the first time travel *novel,* though it comes close. H.G. Wells beat Twain into print with *The Time Machine,* which was first published as a magazine serial under the title, "The Chronic Argonauts," in 1888. However, this is just a publishing coup. No doubt Wells and Twain were both inventing the modern time travel story simultaneously in literary isolation from each other—and so they probably deserve co-credit as the creators of that particular subgenre.

Eric Leif Davin

Editor, *Asimov's*,

Wheew! Talk about getting up on the wrong side of the planet! Somebody give Norman Spinrad a massage or a spliff or a valium or something. The review (diatribe?) of Terry Pratchett's next-to-the-latest novel, *Moving Pictures*, was so heavy it damn near gave my postman a hernia.

A few years back, I had an experience so unexpected it still has me a little bit disturbed. I received a box of books in the mail and took the first one off the stack and began to read it. It was Michael Bishop's *No Enemy But Time.* I stayed glued to the book until I had read it to completion. The next day, I began to read the second book from the stack, which was the latest from the late Dr. Asimov, whom I have idolized since I was a kid. The disturbing fact is that I literally couldn't keep my attention on the book. I had been so powerfully moved and exercised by the depth of the issues raised by Bishop's book and his handling of them that I found Dr. Asimov's book and another I tried to get into the same day, by another favorite of mine, Anne McCaffrey, to pale by comparison.

I'm happy to say I'm back to normal and am once again able to enjoy Dr. Asimov's wonderful writing, as well as McCaffrey's, Conan Doyle's, etc. but I still consider *No Enemy But Time* to be a great, inspired, and poetic work, and I plan to read it again, more slowly, in a year or two.

I normally love everything by Alan Dean Foster, but I find I can't stand the *Spellsinger* series, which

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seems to me to be pasted together for no reason other than to fill book racks. I was crazy about Piers Anthony's earlier works, but find the "Xanth" books to be so cutesie-cute as to be deadly boring.

What's my point? Reading a book, especially a work of comedy, is a very subjective thing and consists as much of what the reader brings to the novel as what the Author provides. I wouldn't expect every other reader to agree with my assessments of the foregoing works, obviously many people disagree or these series wouldn't be so popular and I would be writing to *Michael Bishop's Science Fiction Magazine.*

I consider Norman Spinrad's contempt to be undeserved in this case; I **LOVE** Terry Pratchett's Discworld series, which I find to be as far beyond the Xanth or Spellsinger sort of work as I found Bishop's to be above the normal genre standard of excellence. Spinrad obviously wasn't familiar with the series (Why?), which has built on early established inside- and running jokes in an inspired and hilarious manner.

There is a new hipness, a sort of zen cynicism, a comedie noir attitude about human folly that finds its expression on the David Letterman Show and the Comedy Networks. There is more than a little of it in Dave Barry's columns and Garrison Kielor's monologues. It is the antithesis of the old slapstick, boffo, nudge-in-the-ribs, Las Vegas schtick, but often parodies that sort of bad humor very effectively. The Discworld is firmly in this corner.

I think the reason Spinrad doesn't find Pratchett to be funny is that he doesn't get the joke, as he makes painfully plain in his review. I have never written to dispute a reviewer's opinions before, but I can't let this one pass unanswered, lest some reader miss out on Pratchett's hilarious series as a result.

Yours,

Rocky R. Frisco
1332 S. Florence Pl.
Tulsa, OK 74104-4811

Dear Sirs:

I was saddened to hear of Isaac's death. However huge his contribution to science fiction and fact, I'll remember him best as a friendly acquaintance and dangerous poker foe of forty years standing.

However, I must take issue with some phraseology in his April '92 Editorial. To quote:

"And then I wrote *Fantastic Voyage II.* This was not my idea. Years earlier I had written *Fantastic Voyage.* A movie had been made out of it and it was very successful though I hated it."

This leads to misconception. The story *Fantastic Voyage* was written by myself and Otto Klement, in 1962. We researched it for a year; it ran over two hundred pages. Film rights were sold to Twentieth Century Fox in 1963, and *FV* was released in 1966, with screenplay by Harry Kleiner, and Otto and myself (under one of my pseudonyms, Jay Lewis Bixby) clearly credited as authors of the story. Meanwhile, having retained literary rights, we had arranged for Isaac to novelize the script. The book appeared in 1966, with a foreword by Otto describing its evolu-

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tion from the film based on our story, and expressing our pleasure that Isaac had done it, with his biologist's ability to restore detail (and add much) that could not be put on screen. The novel popularized the story throughout the world . . . and due probably to the luster of his name, many believe to this day that Isaac "wrote" *FV*.

Later he was hired to write *FV-II,* loosely based on a film story I wrote in 1984 (copyright by the Fantastic Voyage Company, in which I am a partner). Our hope was to sell the novel's movie rights. In his introduction, Isaac asserts that unlike the first *FV* novel, based on the inferior '60s film script, this one owed nothing to anyone or anything, i.e., ". . . for better or worse, this novel is *mine.*" Speculation on these gyrations of memory or ego is left to those who knew him better than I. The book wasn't one of his bestsellers. I've since scripted my story, and film prospects appear good.

Jerome Bixby
San Bernardino, CA

Thanks for the wonderful Special Tribute Issue to Isaac.

As a high school freshman I was introduced to Isaac and science fiction simultaneously in the October 1944 issue of *Astounding.* I could never have imagined that exactly forty years later he and I would be president and vice-president, respectively, of the American Humanist Association, and that I would be introducing him at a conference at M.I.T. attended by a clutch of Nobel laureates.

On that occasion I said that "he is not a Renaissance man, but, rather, a one-man renaissance."

Though not physically with us any more, Isaac Asimov will live as long as his books, his influence, and our appreciation and memories.

Edd Doerr
Executive Director
Americans for Religious Liberty
Silver Spring, MD

Dear A-Team,

I read "The Nutcracker Coup" and saw Robert Redford's "A River Runs Through It" the same day. Damn fine storytelling. I hope Janet Kagan writes a few novels set in the "Nutcracker" milieu, and I wish Redford made SF movies.

Thornton Kimes
605½ So. Main
Seattle, WA 98104

Dear *Asimov's*,

I wrote the enclosed when Dr. Asimov's column in *F&SF* stopped. It's situations like this that give procrastination a bad name. Thanks for giving me the chance to sort of make it right. Good luck under the new publisher and keep the spirit of Dr. Asimov alive in your pages. Thanks for the monthly treat.
Sincerely,

Sam Hazelrig

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Several decades ago, my whole family hated me. It was only for a moment and it was because I was the only comfortable family member in a sweatbox of a car full of family members. We were parked in New Iberia, Louisiana, while my father made a sales call and my grandmother, mother, brother, and

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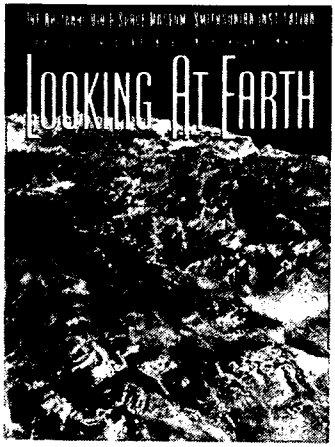

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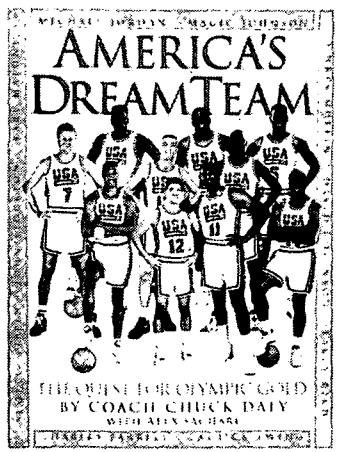

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I were left to enjoy that part of our vacation. I had "Nightfall" and they had the heat and humidity, and it was hard for them.

In the forty years since, I've flown jet fighters in combat, seen the sun rise over Santa Marta, raised a family and lived a lot. And you were always there. You showed us all that there are stranger suns and you showed us the importance of a sense of wonder and curiosity.

When Hari Seldon's predecessors review the twentieth century, I know your body of work will be held in awe. I love my life and I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your influences. I never sang for my father and I never wrote a letter like this, but I never forgot that day in New Iberia, either.

With utmost respect,

Samuel C. Hazelrig
Capt., USAF (finally retired)

Dear Editors,

Dr. Isaac Asimov has been my teacher for the last twenty-eight years. I have learned more—and more accurate—science, history, and history of science from his fiction and nonfiction than I ever learned from dry and outdated high school and college textbooks. In the '60s, when I was a teenager, I wrote him and he very kindly wrote back. Not form letters either, but personal notes, very much to the point. In 1986 I wrote him again, asking for permission to reprint his story "How it Happened" in my anthology, *LDSF 3*. Amazingly, he still remembered our correspondence of about twenty years before, and he granted permission in return for a nominal fee.

The Special Tribute Issue was a comfort and joy, but marred by a mistake on p. 141, where a character in L. Sprague de Camp's story says "the Hebrew word *re'em*, translated as 'behemoth'. . . ." The Hebrew words *re'em* and *behemoth* are not translations of each other. The King James Bible erroneously mistranslates *re'em* as "unicorn." Better translations have "buffalo" or "bison" or "wild ox." The word appears nine times in the Bible. Behemoth appears only once, in Job 40:15. It could refer to the elephant, the hippopotamus, or some large mammal now extinct, or indeed to some mythological beast.

Sincerely,

Benjamin Urrutia
Apt. 7 2023 South 200 East
Salt Lake City, UT 84115

Dear All,

I read the tributes to Isaac Asimov in your November 1992 issue with great sorrow. Yet, as I read I was also awestruck by the man who could cause such love and emotion in so many. Who else in our generation will be thought of so generously by his peers, and by so many who knew him only through his "work"?

I would like to quote something the Good Doctor wrote to me in response to a get-well note I'd written to him some years ago. It has brought me some comfort, as I hope it will all of those who miss Isaac's presence.

> "Thank you so much for your concern. I'm glad I survived, too. You know, however, that although I will hang on as long

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as I can, I can't manage it forever. Someday—. Please be prepared for that. It bothers me that I will someday cause sorrow and I would rather not."

Isaac wrote that in 1984. I hope his family, colleagues, and many millions of fans all over the world will somehow be able to listen to his words.

Thank you for a wonderful issue . . . we must all treasure our memories of this Great Man.

Sincerely,

Susan B. Feinberg
New York, NY

CONTEST FOR SPACE

Spacecause has selected the winner of our letter writing contest. This contest was held because of the crucial importance of space to this nation and the danger that the space program now faces in Washington. Twelve organizations sponsored the contest by advertising the rules in their magazines and newsletters. These publications have a combined circulation of more than two million. These are: American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, *Analog*, *Final Frontier*, International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine, *NASA Tech Briefs*, National Space Society, *Omni*, Spacecause, Spacepac, *Space Station News*, and U.S. Space Foundation.

The space program remains in trouble in Washington due to the severe competition for the federal dollar in this period of budget crisis. Even though the contest is over, your letters are still needed and we urge you to write to your Congressman and two Senators in support of space.

The grand winner is also the winner of the children's division (ages under seventeen). To his Congressman, Adam Gulley, age eleven, wrote:

Dear Mr. Stokes,

May I ask you to support the space station "Freedom"? It could serve as a laboratory for learning how to use the microgravity of space, making possible the materials which would help us all. Maybe we could even discover new ways of improving parts on cars. I'm sure you remember that before the space program, we didn't have very long mileage tires for cars. Now we do. Satellites help us talk to people and watch TV all over the world. If it wasn't for the space program, we wouldn't have these technologies.

"Freedom" could help us answer many questions and problems. We may find cures for terrible diseases that scare us such as AIDS, cancer, leukemia, and Alzheimer's.

It has been estimated that the space station "Freedom" program will employ more than seventy thousand people in at least forty states. These jobs will contribute new ideas, new knowledge, and new products to our economy. Perhaps even I will be among those employed because of space station "Freedom." I hope to do something in the field of space someday. But, I still have a lot of studying to do.

So please, Mr. Stokes, support the space station "Freedom".

Sincerely yours,

Adam Q. Gulley
Cleveland, OH

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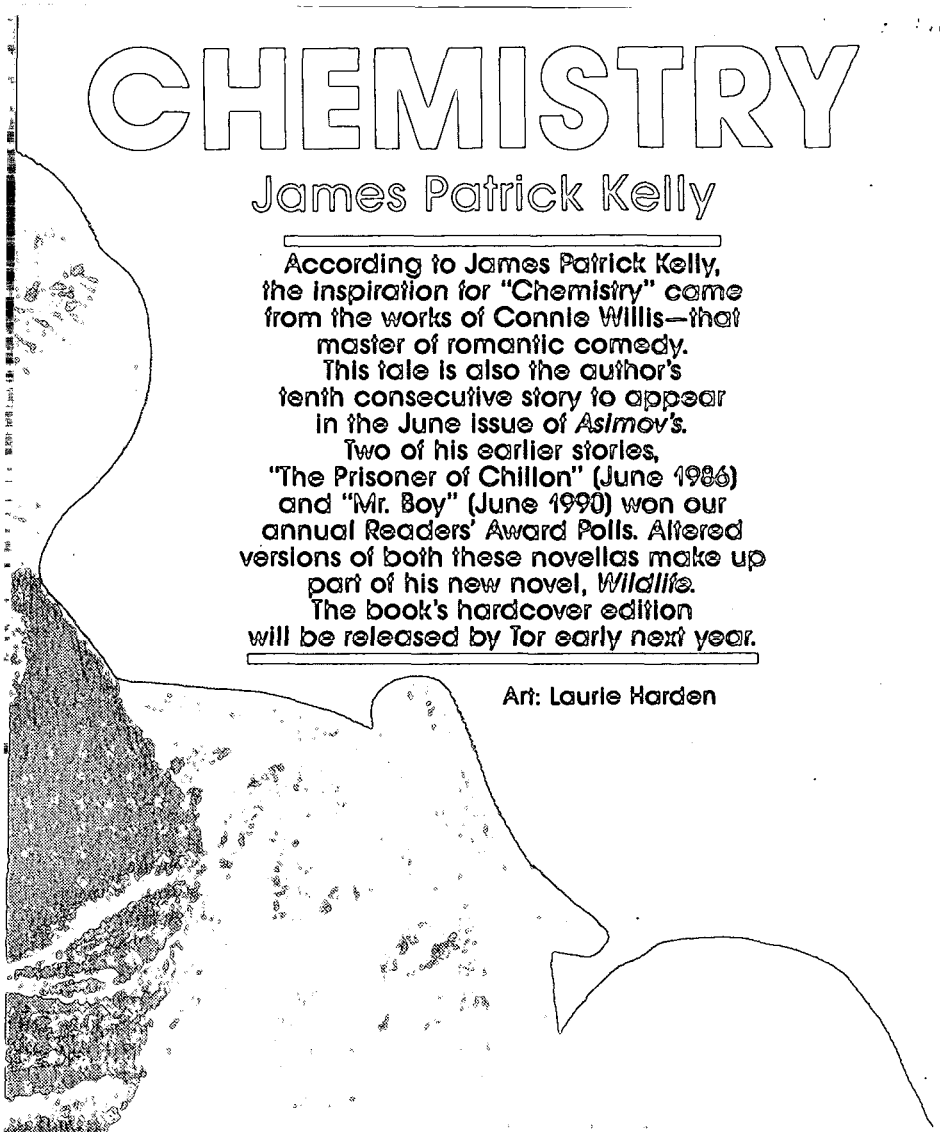
CHEMISTRY

James Patrick Kelly

According to James Patrick Kelly, the inspiration for "Chemistry" came from the works of Connie Willis—that master of romantic comedy. This tale is also the author's tenth consecutive story to appear in the June issue of *Asimov's*. Two of his earlier stories, "The Prisoner of Chillon" (June 1986) and "Mr. Boy" (June 1990) won our annual Readers' Award Polls. Altered versions of both these novellas make up part of his new novel, *Wildlife*. The book's hardcover edition will be released by Tor early next year.



Art: Laurie Harden

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"I'm going to fall in love tonight," said Marja, "and this time you're coming with me."

Lily had been staring without comprehension at *Screen 8 of 23/Brain Mechanisms in Mating*. It was too hot for neurobiology; the spex with their heavy displays kept sliding down her nose. When she pushed them back up, *Screen 8* flickered. "I have to study," she said, trying to remember the last time she'd heard a man whisper her name in the dark.

"Face it, Lily, you think too damn much. What your synapses need is a nice warm norepinephrine bath." Marja Zoltowski had snuggled into a nest of pillows and tilted the top of her head backward against the wall to keep her spex in place. Her extraordinary Adam's apple bobbed when she spoke.

"You Poles are such romantics." Lily shivered the way she used to when Glenn touched her face. "What is tonight, anyway?"

"I don't know. Monday?"

Lily blinked at the calendar icon and waited a second for the spex to retrieve her tickler from memory. "Okay, tomorrow we have day two of Freddy's virtual autopsy," she said, "and Wednesday is the immunology test. We hardly have time to sleep, much less fall for strangers."

"Listen to yourself." Marja shook her head. "Do you call this a life?"

"Nah," said Lily. *Screen 9 of 12* was a diagram of the septo-hypothalamic-mesencephalic continuum. "I call it med school."

"We could try that new place on Densmore Street. It's supposed to be grade."

"We? These are your urges, not mine. Why don't you just program a window shirt to flash *available* and hang out at Wally's?"

"This isn't about sex, Lily, it's about feelings. Believe me, after they crank your hypothalamus you won't be able to tell the difference between neuromance and the real thing."

"Says you."

"Emotions aren't magic, doctor. They are reproducible brain states."

This was something Lily knew to be true, but preferred not to think about—like the correlation between cheesecake and adipose tissue. "Anyway," she said, "we can't afford it."

"Love makes all things possible."

Lily doubted that, but she said nothing.

"I wonder what kind of men go out on a Monday night?" Marja smirked. "Gourmet cooks. Don't fancy restaurants close on Mondays?"

Lily set her spex on the kitchen table, mirror side down, so she wouldn't accidentally catch a glimpse of herself goofing off. "Weekend weathermen," she said. "Priests cutting loose after a long Sunday. I need to study tonight, and so do you." She got up to stretch her legs, but of course there was no room. She and Marja had squeezed into an efficiency

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apartment off campus and their stuff filled the place to overflowing. Two yard sale dressers, two futons, a MedNet node, a whiny refrigerator, a microwave on the kitchen table, two plastic chairs. They had to wash dishes in the bathroom, which had once been a closet. The closet was a clothesline stretched across the west wall. When the place was picked up she could take four, maybe five steps without bumping into something, but at the moment piles of hardcopy booby-trapped the floor like paper banana peels. There was a word for their lifestyle, she realized. Squalor.

"How long have we known each other?" said Marja. "Almost two years and you haven't even breathed on a man. They're not all Glenns, you know. Look, we can fall in and out of love and still be back in plenty of time to weigh old Freddy's nonexistent spleen."

Lily picked up her spex again and held them at arm's length. From a distance the bright little images on the displays looked like a pair of shirt buttons. Had it really been two years? Maybe it *was* time to unbutton herself.

A private security rover patrolled Densmore Street; the servos of its infrared lenses mewled softly as it wove through the twilight. Most of the stores on the block were just closing: La Parfumerie, Hawkins Fine Wines, a World Food boutique, and a couple of art galleries. Next to the Hothouse was the Office Restaurant. Through its windows Lily could see people in gray suits sitting alone at stylized desks, eating absently as they tweaked glowing blue spreadsheets. The neighborhood reeked of money and there was only fifty-three dollars and sixty-seven cents left on her cash card. She wondered how much romance that would buy in the caviar part of town.

At street level the Hothouse was as stolid as a bank: two stories of granite blocks regularly pierced by thin, dark windows. Higher up, it blossomed into a crystalline riot of glass and light. They hesitated in front of the marble threshold.

"I bet they're wearing shoes made of real cow." Lily tucked her purse under her arm as if she expected some rampaging doorman to snatch it from her.

"Don't worry." Marja touched Lily's hand. "You look fine." She had lent Lily a crepe off-the-shoulder dress her grandmother had left her. It was too '90s for Lily's taste, but Marja was the specialist when it came to this sort of thing.

"You too," said Lily, "but that's not what I mean. Look where we are. We can't afford this—unless you don't mind eating Cheerios for supper until finals."

"Come on. How much could it cost?"

"What's the gross national product of Portugal?"

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"I'll ask, okay? I'll just poke my head in the door and find out."

"No, I'm coming." Lily rammed her purse deeper into her armpit and clamped it.

Lily had expected flocked wallpaper and leather couches. Instead there were lots of bright plastic surfaces and a rug with all the ambience of sandpaper. The lobby of the Hothouse was emphatically air-conditioned and illuminated almost to the point of discomfort. Only two of the five ticket booths were open. Beyond them was a bank of sliding doors, textured to look like the trunks of trees.

"Hi." The cashier was a young woman in an extravagant foliage print dress. She had jade highlights in her black hair and an expression as guileless as a pansy. "Are you together?" The button on her collar said *Ju*.

"Yes," said Marja.

"No." Lily nudged her. "We came together, but we're not *together* together."

Ju smiled. "Whatever."

"We're interested," Marja said, "but we're not really sure this place is for us. Can you tell us about it?"

"As in, what does it cost?" Lily said.

Ju slid a brochure across the counter toward them; her fingernails were polished the same green as her hair. "Your basic attraction enhancement is $39.95." She opened it; inside was a map. "Includes admission to all public areas on the third and fifth floors, all gardens, three dance floors, both pools, complimentary swimsuits and towels in the dressing booths. On the fourth floor are stores and services you'll pay extra for. Sit-down and take-out restaurants, bars, gift shops, lingerie boutiques, contraception kiosks, simulators and personal fx galleries."

It's nothing but a mall, Lily thought. I'm twenty-five years old and still looking for love at the mall.

"We also have fifty-three private encounter rooms," Ju pointed to the map, "on the sixth floor. We're the biggest neuromance palace in the city."

Lily watched a little man in a navy blue jacket and gray slacks approach the other cashier. Her age but not her type; he looked as if he had just finished eating a memo salad at the Office Restaurant. "So how do you make someone fall in love?" she asked.

"Oh, we don't make you fall. We enhance the attraction response. There's a big difference. See, we trick this part of your brain called the hypothalamus into ordering up these special hormones. It's all natural."

"Hormones like LHRH and testosterone?" said Lily.

"Testosterone, right." Ju nodded. "That surprised me when I first heard it. I mean, you'd think you'd grow a mustache—or worse. But it's okay;

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I've tried it." She gave them a blissful smile. "Don't know about the one with letters, they all sound the same. To tell the truth, they explained this to me once, but it didn't take. All I know is that whatever we do to you is approved by the FDA and licensed by the Board of Health. This card explains . . ."

"Give me that." Marja snatched it from Lily. "Believe me, the procedure is straight out of Wessinger's neurobiology lab. The less you think about it, the better you'll feel."

"Whatever." Ju dimpled. "But really, one of the best parts is that they tickle something called your vomeronasal organ—don't ask me how. You'll smell stuff you've never noticed before. Unbelievable, how great the food tastes. Try the brownies with brandy sauce." She kissed her fingers to the air and the man waiting at the next booth glanced over at them. Lily thought he might actually be shorter than she was.

"So what if we pay you our forty bucks," she said, "and go upstairs and find there're no human beings left? I don't want to fall for an insurance salesman."

"Oh, that's not a problem, believe me. We offer a money back guarantee, but only a few people ask. See, when those elevator doors open into the welcome garden, you're . . . I don't know . . . ripe. I can't explain it exactly, but enhancement makes me realize how cute men look, how sweet they can be. At least while they're here. And it's really a grade crowd tonight. Some real hammers, if you know what I mean. I kind of wish I wasn't working myself."

An older man who shouldn't have been wearing red skintights got in line behind them, so they gave Ju their cash cards. While she debited them, she had them press thumbs to a blood drawer. She printed two green buttons that read *Lily* and *Marja* and explained that green was for righties, red for gays. She had them sign liability waivers, told them they'd need to give a urine sample, and warned them about side effects. Although enhancement would wear off in four to five hours, they might have trouble falling asleep immediately after leaving the Hothouse; there was a chance their next periods might be a couple of days off schedule. She grinned, reminded them about the brownies and ushered them through the booth.

"We're in this together, right?" Lily whispered as the tree trunk doors opened. "You'll stop me before I do anything stupid?"

Marja laughed and patted her on the back. "Sort of late for that now."

Lily rubbed the button-sized swelling on her wrist where the orderly had poked her with the pressure syringe. Her purse hung loosely by her side.

"Pulse accelerated." Marja was practically vibrating as the elevator

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climbed to the third floor. "Skin temperature elevated. Apocrine sweat glands—whew!" She peered into Lily's left eye, "Doctor, your pupils are dilated!"

"Stop diagnosing."

"Okay, so how do you feel?"

Lily considered and then giggled. "Like I'm six and it's Christmas Eve. You're losing your corsage."

Marja repinned an orchid that the orderly had laced with pheromones synthesized from her urine sample. The doors slid open.

Fifteen or twenty faces turned, glowing with expectation. Lily was instantly drawn to them, understanding their conspicuous need because she shared it. They had hauled themselves out of the icy datastream into the warmth of high touch and beautiful feelings. As the enhancement drugs gripped her, she felt the weight of her life drop away. Tomorrow they would all go back to their desks and workshops and counters and she would ligate the arteries of a cybercorpse named Fred. But that was far removed from this bright dream of lush and immediate sensation. She let it fill her lungs and eyes and ears; she wanted to lick it. A band stood poised to play. Leaves like green hands waved at her. She itched to rub her bare feet on the moss rug, shinny up that palm tree, kiss all three of those men by the fountain just to find out how they tasted. No, she wasn't going to ask for her money back. She knew she would find him here. Someone to love, for a little while at least. His identity was a mystery only she could solve: Lily Brewster, girl detective. Maybe he was still lingering at the marble threshold on Hope Street, ten thousand miles below, or already talking to Ju in the lobby. Most likely he was watching her, one of the happy faces that she now noticed were arranged in a kind of loose formation. She and Marja stepped down into the welcome garden's central courtyard and smiling people closed around them.

She smiled back, even after she realized she was going to have to square dance.

The bass player had a voice as friendly as a milk commercial.

"All square your sets around the hall,
Four couples to a set, listen to the call."

He chose "The Texas Star," a simple figure dance which featured constant switching of partners.

Her first was the short man from the lobby; his green name badge read *Steve*. She couldn't understand how he had gotten to the welcome garden before her. Just as the dance began, he insisted on shaking her hand. "You're freezing!" Lily said, clasping his cold hand between hers.

He stared as if he were memorizing her face. "I just washed up." When the fiddles started, he led her into a left-faced turn under his arched right arm. "You know, Lily, your handshake tells a lot about you."

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"Meet your partner, pass on by
Pick up your next one on the fly."

Nick, a pale man with a mustache like a caterpillar, said, "I know you! We met at Justin Metaphor's last image launch." He stared at Lily's corsage as if he wanted to eat it. "You came as President Garmezy."

"Not me," she said. "I'm a Neurocrat."

"Smalls back out, bigs go in,
Make that Texas Star again."

"Am I a big or a small?" She crooked her arm into that of a heavyweight with hair down his neck. Tomasz had feet as wide as shovels.

"You're a small, my kitten, but plenty big enough for me." He had a thick Middle European accent; she decided to leave him for Marja.

"Bigs back out and all circle eight
Circle back to place 'til you get it straight."

The fiddlers stroked their instruments. Was that her roommate, skipping like a girl scout? Lily was determined to initiate the next conversation. "This is probably the silliest damn thing I've ever done," she said to a red badge named Renfred who smelled of cigarettes.

"Never done it before." Sweat beaded across his face like a glass of iced tea. "I'm from Toronto."

"Hand over hand and heel over heel
The more you dance the better you feel."

"I've finally decided who you remind me of." Keith had green eyes and more teeth than a shark. "One of those Vermeer women, standing in front of a window." The fat end of his untied tie dangled in front of his crotch and the skinny end beat against his pocket as he danced. "Vermeer, you know, the painter?"

Not a bad line, she thought, but he ruined it by prompting her. "Keith." She tugged the tie from around his neck and handed it to him. "Is this yours?"

Her next partner ignored her. "Yes, of course I did." He spoke over his shoulder to the Asian woman behind Lily. "She belonged with her parents."

"Tuck in your shirt, pull down your vest
And bow to the one you like the best."

The fiddlers tipped their instruments toward the caller and the dance ended. Lily might have nodded at Keith, the Vermeer fan, if he'd been paying attention, but he was already fawning over an older woman with eyes like targets. Someone tapped her left shoulder; she turned.

"My name is Steve." The guy with cold hands bowed.

"Lily." She glanced down to see that she hadn't lost her name badge. "Obviously."

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"Lily, do you know that people rarely change their first impressions?" His eye contact was relentless.

"Is that so?" she said. Steve was as clean-cut as a Marine recruiter. He had stubby fingers and wide shoulders. A thread hung loose from the middle buttonhole of his jacket. "What's yours?" He hadn't gotten any taller.

He held up open palms, as if to show he was unarmed. "That you're gorgeous, lonely, nervous, and still shopping. Will you at least let me shake your hand again?"

"Promise to give it back?" she said. He had a precise and sincere grip that didn't try to prove anything. "You've warmed up." Their hands fit together nicely.

"When my palms get sweaty," he said, "I rinse them under cold water. It's a sales trick: the confident man keeps a cool hand."

She had never understood why men always said such odd things to her.

"Here's another," he continued. "Say we're shaking and you haven't decided whether to trust me. Look where your hand is, Lily. When we started talking, you kept it close to your body. Now that I've drawn it toward me slightly, you've come along with it."

Lily let go of him. She reminded herself that this was a man with a crew cut who practiced sales tricks. "And what are you trying to sell me?"

"I don't know yet." His voice was low. "First I have to find out if I carry what you want."

The elevator doors opened and everyone turned to inspect the new arrivals. It was Old Man Skintights and a thirtyish brunette in a caramel-colored suit. As the dancers moved to welcome them, the fiddlers picked up their bows.

"Never leave a prospect until you schedule your next meeting." Steve grinned. "Shall we say, after this dance?" He strolled away whistling but paused at the edge of the garden and called to her. "I like you, Lily Obviously." He disappeared behind a hibiscus covered with red flowers.

There's a man who knows exactly what he wants, she thought, and I'm it. She was at once pleased and scared and slightly let down. Where had he gone so abruptly? To rinse in cold water?

The caller tapped the belly of his bass. "*All square your sets . . .*"

Lily had intended to dance again, but that was what he expected her to do. She thought it better to be unpredictable, make his hands sweat. She spotted some people gathered beneath a statue of a satyr groping a nymph.

"Now you're getting into ideology," a nervous black man said. "Ask Alice about that."

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"About what?" said a woman in a poet's blouse and orange tights.

"Keith here claims the female orgasm is vestigial. A leftover, like an appendix."

"Should we kill him now," Betty said to T.J., who had his arm around her waist, "or hear him out first?"

"Hey, I'm not against anyone's orgasm," Keith said quickly. "My point is that in evolutionary terms, female orgasm is irrelevant. Some societies don't even have a word for it."

"We should make one up for them," said Lily. "How about shimmer? Or leap?"

"Oh yes, baby, yes, I'm rippling."

Alice shook her head. "Maybe you ripple, honey, but I *surge*."

All the women laughed.

Keith wasn't giving up. "Women reproduce whether they climax or not. With us, orgasm is everything. If we don't come, there's no ball game."

"*Ball* game?" Betty rubbed against T.J. "Why is it that whenever we try to talk about love, men change the subject to sports?"

"It's because we take pleasure differently," said Alice. "A man gets off on objects. He sees tits and an ass and he doesn't care who they're attached to. We need intimacy and tenderness to enjoy ourselves. We don't give a damn how big his cock is; we want to know the size of his feelings."

"All men want is sex." Maya sighed. "We want love."

"Ah, bullshit," said T.J. "I want to dance."

"Look, someone's imprinting."

The band broke into the ceremonial "Only You Tonight" and dancers closed in a circle around a couple, clapping and cheering them on. Lily strained to see who it was. Big Tomasz with the shovel feet—and Marja! "Wait!" As Lily raced across the courtyard, Marja pulled Tomasz down to her. He buried his nose in her corsage. The orderly had explained that once two people imprinted themselves with each other's pheromones, they would be inseparable the rest of the night. When Tomasz came up, his eyes were gleaming.

Lily waved frantically at her but Marja paid no attention. Tomasz offered her the chocolate the Hothouse staff had impregnated with his own musky androstenols. It was wrapped in gold foil; she unpeeled it lasciviously, pressed it between her lips and chewed, her jaws working around a cheek-stretching smile.

The crowd's rhythmic clapping punctuated the impromptu ceremony. "Let's congratulate the new couple," said the caller from behind his bass. Now that they had imprinted, their badges changed to a color which only

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they shared. It was the purple of venous blood. "Seal it with a kiss!" the caller cried.

The crowd whooped.

"Isn't he grade?" Marja was glowing. "Am I lucky or what? This is Lily, my roommate. Tomasz is a lion tamer, can you believe that?" Lily could smell the chocolate on her breath.

"Mój Boże, Marja, ja Çie kocham."

"Aren't lions extinct?" Lily said.

He didn't hear her; he and Marja were kissing again. By the time they finished, Lily assumed he had forgotten the question, so she asked again.

"In the wild, yes." He kept one massive arm clasped around Marja's shoulder as if she were a trophy he had just won. "I work with the New World cats mostly, cougars and jaguars. We have one leopard." He feinted at her with his free hand and grinned when she recoiled. "All strong enough to kill you."

"I didn't even know the circus was in town."

"They leave Wednesday," said Marja. "Which is why we're going to the fifth floor right now and find a quiet place and tell each other our life stories. Maybe later we can swim."

"I want an olive pizza," said Tomasz, "and a liter of kava."

"Okay, kava and pizza." She nestled up to him. "What else do you want?"

He had a laugh that could worry a cougar.

"So Marja," said Lily, "maybe we should set a time to meet?"

"No, no, I'll get home on my own." She gave Lily a look like a bedroom door closing. "Don't wait up. I'll see you at Freddy's tomorrow."

"Freddy?" said Tomasz.

"He's nobody," she said as she steered her prize away.

Lily filled with doubts as she watched her friend go. They had promised not to let each other do anything stupid. Did falling for a lion tamer qualify? Now that she'd been abandoned, she wished she were home studying. Coming to the Hothouse made sense in the romantic abstract, but the men here were all annoyingly specific. She wasn't attracted to anyone and even if she were, how could she trust her feelings? They'd pumped her so full of hormones she could probably fall for a vacuum cleaner if it smelled right. She decided she didn't much like being enhanced, although she understood that there was no difference between the brain chemistry of neuromance and actually falling in love. Despite her B+ in Wessinger's class, Lily was reluctant to accept a mechanistic view of her inner life. She didn't like being reminded that love, hope, and joy were merely outputs of her limbic system. What she ought to do was march right down for a refund, go home and stare into her spex until she had memorized the immunoglobulins. The idea was oddly comforting:

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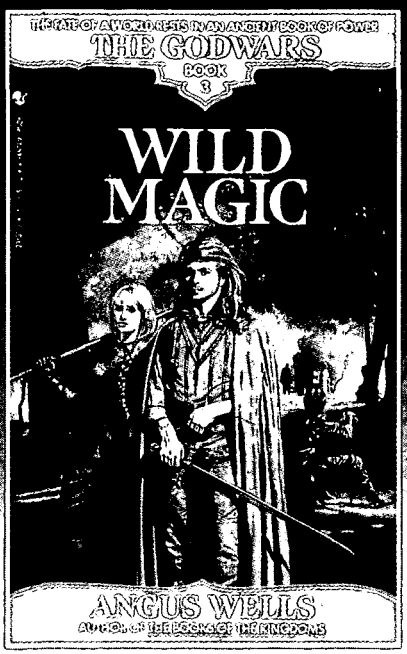
"High fantasy adventure at its best."
–The Knoxville News-Sentinel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SPECTRA BANTAM

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maybe the enhancement was wearing off. Marja had warned her that thinking too much about it might spoil the effect.

"You didn't dance."

She moaned. "Oh, shit." She couldn't help herself. Steve had taken off the navy blue jacket; he was wearing a white shirt and a red striped tie. "I'm sorry. Look, this has nothing to do with you. You seem nice enough. It's just . . . I'm probably going to leave. Get my money back."

"Why?"

"Because I don't like being programmed. I mean, I realized that's what would happen when I walked in, but I thought somehow it would fool me. Now I know better. This just doesn't feel like love. It's a chemistry experiment."

"You've been in love before, Lily?"

"Of course." He wouldn't take a hint; she'd probably have to be rude.

"What's it like?"

"Oh, come on." She watched him watching her, his pupils like black buttons. "You know."

"No. I've never been in love."

"What, you grew up in a monastery?"

The sarcasm seemed to bounce off him. "I thought I was in love once." He paused, as if deciding how much to tell her. "We worked in the same office. She was older. Married. When her husband found out, she broke it off. She said she didn't love me and that I didn't really love her."

"And you believed her?" Lily didn't know why she was encouraging him.

He nodded. "She was right. The sex was great but it wasn't love. I got all excited because she was beautiful, smart, rich, powerful, what I thought I wanted. But we never talked, except about the business or the weather or what hotel to meet at. The day we broke up she told me she was a Catholic and went to church every Sunday. She said she'd felt really guilty about what we'd been doing. It wasn't a secret, I just never asked."

The elevator doors opened again and a bald Hispanic woman blinked in astonishment at the welcome garden.

"I realized that if I hadn't loved *her,* then I'd never loved anyone."

The musicians were ready. "Hell of a thing to find out about yourself," she said.

"Something I'd like to fix, Lily."

This was her chance; she could escape into the next dance. She wouldn't have to hurt him—not that she cared. Afterward she could sneak away. She didn't need a man with another woman's footprints up his back. But if she left now, who was going to make sure Marja didn't run off with the circus?

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"What happened to your jacket?" she said. "Your name badge?"

"I went to find a place where we could be alone. I left them to hold our spot."

The bass player announced a new dance called "Swing or Cheat" and sets began forming around them.

"It's really pretty," Steve said. "There's a stream and a bush with tiny oranges on it and white flowers that smell like honey."

Lily was getting used to the way he made eye contact. Whatever Steve's other faults, she believed he was sincere. Glenn had always looked away when he lied to her.

"You just left your jacket there?" she said. "I hope no one takes it."

He led her down a slate path past the eight foot wide sheet of falling water which drowned the shrilling of the fiddles. They turned into one of the garden's many little clearings. The bench was wrought iron; it sat low on a lawn of lemon thyme. The stream burbled in front of them and the air hung heavy and sweet. Steve's jacket was folded over the armrest.

"Calamondin oranges." She slid her purse under the bench. "They're sour, just barely edible. They make good marmalade, though."

"How do you know so much about plants?"

"My dad's hobby, actually. He had a greenhouse. I remember in the winter, it was always so bright and warm. Like going on vacation. The pots were all on wheels; when he was away I used to move plants around and build myself a jungle. He was away a lot. He was a doctor too."

"Is he still alive?"

"No, my parents are both dead." She let one of her shoes drop off. "He always said he liked flowers so much he had one for a daughter." She tickled her foot in the thyme. This clearing reminded her of one of her jungles.

"My father is an engineer on an oil tanker," Steve said. "He'd be at sea for three months and then with us for two. I missed him when he was away, but once he got home I couldn't wait for him to ship out again. He was too strict and he yelled at Mom. Since they divorced, I haven't seen him much. Now Mom—she's great. She worked twenty-eight years at Sears, wherever they needed her. She could talk you into a tent or towels or a thinkmate, no problem. I was a shy boy, if you can believe that, but she kept pushing me. She said I had to go out and show the world what a great son she had."

As he spoke, Lily folded and unfolded her hands. She didn't want to hear about Steve's family problems and now she was embarrassed to have shared memories of her father with a stranger. "What are we doing here?"

"I don't know about you, Lily, but I'm enjoying the view." He leaned

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back and looked her up and down with obvious approval. "Pretty flowers, great company—hey, ssh!"

He held a finger to his lips. There were muffled voices, then footsteps on the path. The foliage hid the strollers but as they approached Lily heard a man declaiming with the grandiloquence of a longtime Shakespeare abuser. "She walks in *beauty*, like the *night* of cloudless climes and *starry skies;* and all that's *best* of dark and bright, meet in her aspect and her *eyes*. . . ."

Lily held in her laughter until they were safely past, then she burst. After a second, Steve roared too, although she suspected that it was only because he was relieved that she was finally unwinding.

"So you can laugh," he said. "What an improvement!"

"It's just . . . the old Byron trick." She couldn't catch her breath. "The corniest, the lamest . . ." she started to dissolve again.

"This Byron writes poems?"

"Lord Byron, you dope." It didn't seem to help. "Hey, even I know Byron and I took hackers' English in college."

He leaned forward and reached between his feet for a sprig of thyme. He said nothing.

"I can't believe anyone over eighteen would fall for a line like that."

He started defoliating the thyme. "Maybe she likes poetry."

"But don't you see, that's the whole problem! Tired old poems work, dumb songs work, honesty works, lies work, every trick in the book works. There's no choice involved, we're practically defenseless here."

"You know what the problem is, Lily?" He looked unhappy. "You're too busy thinking to enjoy yourself."

She was surprised at how much his disapproval stung. "Excuse *me?*" He was nobody, a pushy salesman she hardly knew. "Using your head isn't exactly a handicap, you know." She waited for him to apologize, explain himself, make her feel better, but he let the silence stretch. The dumb little bastard. He wasn't going to get away with hurting her; she could retaliate. "So Steve, what was your major in college?" She already knew the answer.

"Didn't have one."

"Oh come on, everyone . . ."

"Didn't go."

The stream babbled through another long silence. She thought of twelve different things to say, but couldn't speak because she was too ashamed of herself for humiliating him. What a snob she was! If this was neuromance then she could do without it; she'd had more conflicting feelings in the past half hour than she'd had in six months. Steve stood up, put on his jacket, sat down again. She watched him, an emptiness

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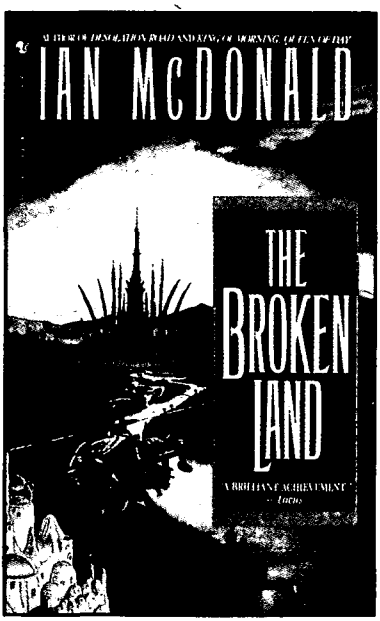
"Resonates with Unnerving Universal Truths"

–San Francisco Examiner-Chronicle



SPECTRA BANTAM

"It's true: All that is necessary for evil to triumph is that good men do nothing. Ethnic conflict will be the killer disease of the 21st century unless the Silent Majority ends its complacent silence. Having lived under the shadow of my country's Troubles for 24 years, I felt I could keep silent no longer. *The Broken Land* is the story of how Mathembe Fileli, herself silent, finds a new voice in which to speak and unite rather than divide.

Reaction has been curious: The closer I get to home, the more each side accuses me of being biased toward the other. I suppose I must be doing something right."

Ian McDonald

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growing within her. Maybe she couldn't fall anymore, maybe the parts of her brain that loved had atrophied.

"You never answered my question, Lily," he said.

"What was it?"

"You were going to tell me what it's like to be in love."

"It stinks, actually." She didn't hesitate. "You lose everything, your friends, your freedom. Your bathroom. He kicks you awake at three in the morning but if he's not there you can't sleep. He never wants the vid you want and he doesn't eat fish and he can't wait to tell you when you're wrong. And when you're fighting, it feels like you're getting an appendectomy without anesthesia."

"You call that a sales pitch?" There was a hint of a smile on his lips. "If it's so horrible, why come here?"

"I don't know why I came here." Another silence that she didn't want loomed. "I'm sorry, Steve."

"Hey, you said my name! That's the first time you said my name."

"I figured it was time, since you've said mine a hundred times already." She gave a dry chuckle. "What is that, anyway, another sales trick?"

"You know studies show only 20 percent of communication is verbal." He slid slowly across the bench toward her. "The other 80 percent depends on non-verbal cues." He kept coming. "Facial expressions, posture, tone of voice." When he stopped, they were six inches apart. "I'm in your personal space now. We're not touching but you can feel me, can't you?"

"Yes." She liked the feeling. It was like coming out of an ice storm and standing next to a crackling fire.

"Sales tricks are based on the way people are, Lily. They connect with real feelings. Sure, some people use them to sell bad products or unnecessary ones, but I don't. I just try to give the prospect what she wants."

Lily watched his mouth as he spoke. For some reason, the way his lips moved fascinated her. She could see his teeth and the tip of his tongue.

"But you don't know what you want, do you?" he said.

"I want to be happy."

"But you don't want to fall in love?" He leaned and brushed his shoulder against her. "Lose your freedom? Everything?"

"Maybe it's too late." She was surprised to hear herself say it aloud, although she had known it for some time. "I wonder what would happen if I sniffed my own corsage?" She touched it absently. "Probably spend the night crouching by the stream, admiring myself."

"I'd like to spend the night admiring you, Lily. Obviously."

She laughed and then she kissed him. When she closed her eyes, he smelled like chocolate. It had to be some kind of trick, she thought before

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she stopped thinking. When she finished with him, she saw her own smile reflected on his lips.

"I'm hungry." Lily slipped her hand into his pocket. "Do you have anything to eat?" She trapped the candy against his taut abdominal muscles.

He squirmed as if he were ticklish. "Can we do this in private?"

As far as she was concerned, the rest of the Hothouse was nothing but rumors and mist. "We can do whatever we want."

She expected some kind of cortisol and epinephrine boost when she ate the chocolate but all she felt was the lingering warmth of his kiss. It was only when he lowered his head slowly, deliberately, to her corsage, that her blood began to pound. He filled his lungs with her scent. "Nice," he said, "but I prefer the real thing."

"Hey look," she said, "our badges have already changed. . . ."

He covered her mouth with his, filling her world in all directions. He certainly knew how to sell a kiss. She brushed her fingertips across his cheek and he pulled back and rubbed his cheek against hers. "You like to hear me say your name." He nuzzled her ear. "Don't you?" He was whispering. "Lily?"

"Yes," she said. "Oh, yes."

She told him about getting an A – in Professor Graves' Anatomy class where twenty students failed and he told her about the time he'd hit a grand slam off Chico Moran, who was now the number two starter for the Dodgers. She'd done her pre-med at Michigan State and he'd played shortstop for a season and a half with the Red Sox's farm team in New Britain, Connecticut, before blowing out his knee sliding into third. It was the worst moment of his life; hers was when her father died. He was twenty-six, she was twenty-five. She warned him she wouldn't eat artichokes or buffalo or anything with peanut butter in it. He'd never had an artichoke. He bragged about the time his mother sold a watch to Vice President Blaine and made the six o'clock news. Her mother had never worked, she'd stayed home to take care of Lily and her two sisters and drink blush wine. Lily was the youngest, Steve was an only child. She complained about Marja's shoes. He hardly ever saw his best friend because he caught for the Colorado Rockies. He made her tell him about Glenn who was at Johns Hopkins now studying gerontology because that was where the money was. They'd lived together off-campus their senior year in East Lansing; Glenn had a four handicap in golf and wanted her to wear stupid hats when he was in the mood for sex. He told her a little more about Marsha, how she'd taught him how to sell and how she apologized for her Caesarian scar the first time they'd made love. He said their best times together were when she let him drive her Porsche 717

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and Lily laughed and said Glenn had a Mazda Magic which he had never let her drive but that once when he went home for his grandmother's funeral she had swiped his keys and cranked it to 110 on I-96 and had never told anyone until now so they pressed their bodies hard against each other and kissed until their lips were numb and Lily wondered what it cost to rent an encounter room on the sixth floor.

By eleven the clearing was too small for them. It was time to see if their new-found infatuation was portable. They started strolling hand in hand up the slate path before she realized she had left her purse behind.

Almost everybody in the welcome garden had paired up and dispersed; there were only enough dancers to make two sets. Lily thought she detected a note of desperation in the music. As the dancers promenaded, the caller warned them:

Hurry up strangers, don't be slow,
You'll never fall in love unless you do-si-do.

Maybe the band was ready to pack up. As she watched Old Man Skintights bravely circling the floor, she wondered what it would feel like to get enhanced and then not find anyone to fall for. A refund wouldn't really cover the cost of being iced out at a neuromance palace. She remembered her first glimpse of the welcome garden, when it had bubbled with exotic possibilities. Now it seemed as flat as yesterday's champagne.

"They gave us four or five hours," she said. "At midnight we all turn into pumpkins."

Steve had zero tolerance for melancholy. "This way." He aimed her at the elevators.

"No," she said, "let's walk up."

"Two flights?"

"Oh, we have to peek at shops on the fourth floor," she said. He looked doubtful. "Maybe get something to eat?"

"I'm not hungry."

"Well, what if I am?"

He colored; it was the first time she had seen him embarrassed. "Sorry." He turned reluctantly toward the stairs but when he tugged at her to follow, she let him go.

"Steve, what's the matter?"

"I don't know." He shrugged. "Maybe it's just that I hate being sold things I don't need." She sensed that he wanted to say something else—but he didn't.

"I'll swallow my cash card, okay?" Lily said. He reached out for her and she came to him. "I'll be good. Promise."

Where the third floor had been a hot, dark blur, the fourth was a place to lounge and consume conspicuously. With its open sight lines, it flaunted the true size of the Hothouse. The shops and restaurants ringed

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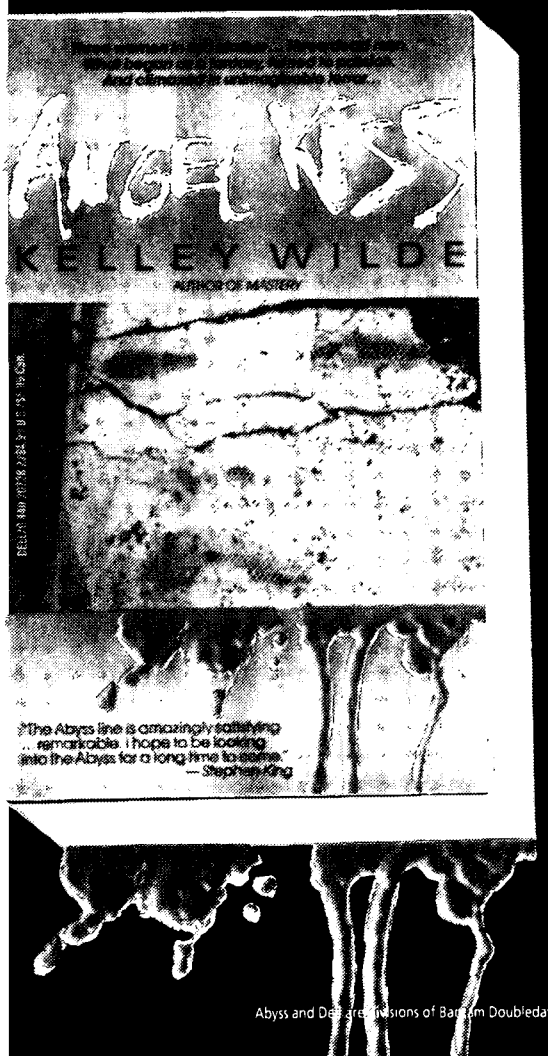
DEADLY PASSION AWAITS...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an enormous irregularly shaped pool. Its bays and peninsulas were landscaped with bougainvillea. There were sandy beaches and ten-foot bluffs. They saw couples sprawled on checked tablecloths beside wicker picnic baskets: the picnickers drank wine from bottles with broad shoulders and broke long sticks of French bread.

"We can swim," said Lily. "That's free."

"Sure." When he gave her a forlorn smile, she worried that he was relieved to be getting away from her.

The dressing booths were between the Honey Bun Bakery and the Intimate Moment, a lingerie store. The bakery breathed the yeasty aroma of warm bread at them. Lily's mouth watered but she said nothing. Instead she kissed Steve and he brightened. They went through separate doors.

Her booth was a four-foot square; its only furnishing was a shelflike seat. The far wall was a screen on which appeared her image, larger than life. She winked at herself and then giggled because she was certain that she had just discovered Steve's secret character flaw: he was cheap. Somehow that reassured her, perhaps because it was so curable. It wasn't as if he were a womanizer or a drunk or a golfer. Lily believed she understood thrift since she practiced it of necessity herself. Someday, when she was a rich gynecologist, they would come here and she would buy him something from every shop.

Suddenly the little booth seemed very chilly. The enhancement that had helped her fall for Steve would wear off in a couple of hours and then what would be left of her feelings for him? Maybe there wasn't going to be any *someday* with Steve.

"Welcome to the Hothouse." When the booth spoke to her, it was her own image that appeared to be talking. "This is a dressing booth. Occupancy is strictly limited to one. For those couples requiring privacy, may we suggest our encounter rooms on the sixth floor?"

"Oh?" She leered at herself. "And how much would they cost?"

Eight windows opened down the lefthand side of the screen. "Encounter rooms range from $20 to $110." Each window showed a differently priced room. Twenty dollars bought a closet with a bed in it; the suite with a chandelier and the flocked wallpaper cost a hundred. "Shall I make a reservation for you now?"

"No, make me a bathing suit."

The rooms disappeared. "Swimdress, tank, two piece or bikini?"

"Bikini."

She whimpered when saw herself on the screen in a generic black bikini. There had to be some perverse glitch in the booth's software; her skin was the color of cement and her knees looked like doorknobs.

"Would you prefer a bandeau, halter or athletic top?"

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"Bandeau."

"Underwire, sculptex, pump, or natural?"

"Pump?"

She watched in horror as her breasts rose like popovers baking on fast-forward. If they'd been lifted any higher they would have been pointing at the moon.

"No, natural."

They receded. She turned sideways and eyed her figure hopelessly. She experimented with a high-cut brief but the edges of her glutei maximi hung out of it like mocking fleshy grins. The booth could fabricate the suit in any of three thousand prints or 1.2 million solids. With a sigh, she chose something in the mid-cyan range. Letting him see her in a swimsuit on the first date—what *had* she been thinking of? A drawer slid open with the suit and towel in a sealed plastic bag.

"After pressing your thumb to the printreader, deposit your belongings in the drawer for later retrieval." Lily could not help but think of Steve's cool hands as she started unbuttoning the front of her dress.

She came out of the dressing booth and immediately panicked: Steve wasn't waiting. The door to his booth was open! Her first thought was that he was mad at her and had left. Her skin felt tight. Maybe he'd gone back to the welcome garden to try his luck again, or left the Hothouse altogether. Oh God, what had she been thinking of? They should've taken the damn elevator; she didn't really care about swimming and she couldn't afford to shop. She had to find him, apologize—but should she get dressed first or ransack the Hothouse in her bikini? While she was trying to decide, he came out of the men's room. The sight of him made her eyes burn. This was love, yes, it had already reduced her to a dithering adolescent.

"Lily, are you all right?" he said.

She swooped into his embrace. "Fine now." She didn't know why it had bothered her before that he was short. She put her arms around his compact athlete's body and realized that a larger man wouldn't be quite so huggable. She noticed that he was slightly lopsided, right deltoids and biceps bigger than the left. All those throws to first base. "I just missed you."

"Look at you." He peeled her away from him. "You're beautiful. Fantastic."

They kissed again and she ran her fingertips across his back and felt his skin warming hers. She knew exactly what had happened: the fear of losing him had hit her in the adrenal glands. Hard. Hormones had seeped and messenger chemicals had washed into the deepest parts of her brain but the chemistry didn't matter to her anymore. She wanted him. It wasn't only lust; she wanted to ease his pain over losing baseball,

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to thank him for listening to her whine about Glenn, to show him what love might be. They would be so good for one another, only she didn't have the twenty dollars. She tried to think of a way to get him to split the cost of a room without aggravating him about the money.

"Lily," he murmured. "There's something I have to tell you."

She shuddered—she hated the way men confessed! They didn't know how and besides, whenever they were sorry, it was always for the wrong thing. Lily wasn't interested in what he had to say. She wanted to tell him to shut up. But she didn't have to.

"Lily!" Someone was waving.

"Over here. *Lily.*" Marja stood, hands raised, on a red-checked tablecloth on the beach. Tomasz lolled at her feet like a sleepy tiger.

"Just wave back," said Steve, "we really need to talk."

"She's my best friend. She'll strangle me if I don't introduce you."

Marja was wearing a purple maillot that had a cookie-sized transparency sprite roving across its surface, exposing pale skin. That might have explained why her cheeks were so red, but Lily doubted it. Tomasz sat up as they approached and rubbed his eyes. There was a half-full bottle of kava in the picnic basket. Someone had kicked white sand into an empty pizza carton.

"And who is this?" Marja said.

"Steve." Lily said. "My God, Steve, you haven't told me your last name yet."

"Beauchamp."

"Nice to meet you." They shook hands; Lily watched and wondered what he discovered about her. "I was just about to swim," said Marja. "You two interested in a quick dip?"

"Sure," said Lily. She glanced over at Steve; he was pouting. "Steve?"

He shook his head.

"Good. Let the ladies go." Tomasz rolled toward the kava. "We'll work the bottle."

The two women waded into the tepid water. When it lapped at her waist, Marja sank backward with a weary moan. "A pretty little one you picked," she said.

"I think so," Lily said. "So, did you do anything stupid yet?"

"I let him talk me into this damn bathing suit. Bad enough people can see my thighs but random nudity . . ." She snorted in disgust. "My synapses don't snap for Tomasz the way they used to, but it was grade while it lasted."

"How was the sixth floor?"

"What, am I still flushed? For a while I thought my face had caught fire." She ducked underwater and came up spluttering laughter. "He's one of the hammers—isn't that what the receptionist called them? Wasn't

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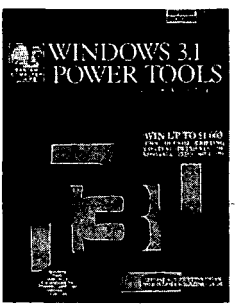

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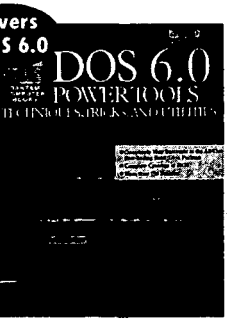

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much of a talker, but he communicated, wow. Got that from his cats, I guess. Funny to be talking about him in the past tense already." She splashed Lily. "So did you have an encounter?"

"We've talked a lot, that's all. He's very . . . I don't know . . . decisive. From the moment we met he seemed so sure that he wanted me. Eventually I started wanting him. A lot." She laughed. "Whatever they gave us must have worked overtime because I . . . I think I really love him, Marja. I don't want this to be over in an hour." She did a few backstrokes away from the shore, where Steve was gesturing at Tomasz with the bottle of kava. "Is that supposed to happen?"

"Hey, maybe you talked too much, roomie. You're not in the market for a keeper. Besides, where would you put him?"

"He can stay at his place; I just want to borrow him once in a while. Anyway, right before we spotted you he said he had something important to tell me, which is probably that he's emigrating to Uzbekistan next Wednesday." When Lily waved to him, Steve got up and walked to the edge of the water. "I should get back," she said.

"Tomasz and I are about done, Lily." Marja looked worried. "Maybe we should both call it a night? Get his number. If you're still hot in the morning, you can call him."

She treaded water, not listening. "Ever hear of a baseball player named Chico Moran?"

Flowers had overrun the fifth floor. They marched down crushed stone paths and spread across parterres and perennial borders. This was a strolling floor, not as private as the third, nor as public as the fourth. The oak benches tucked beside the flower beds were clearly visible from the paths. The only privacy was that afforded by politeness. Lily and Steve passed blindly past two laughing gay men and an elderly couple who had fallen asleep. She, however, could not help but gape at the impossible couple of Alice the feminist and Keith the lizard, entwining passionately.

Finally they chanced upon an empty bench which faced a drift of impatiens swarming around the legs of burgundy roses. She leaned over to smell one and then covered a yawn with the back of her hand. It was almost one. Time for him to stop talking and get back to kissing.

Steve waved for her to sit beside him. "Because good salesmen don't lie, Lily." He put his arm around her. "We have to buy before we can sell. First I have to believe that my product is the best for you, otherwise I can't get you interested in it. And I do, Lily. Maybe you still have some doubts, but I know I'd be good for you."

"No, I'm sure too." She was delighted that it was still true. Marja was

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no doubt already home in bed; Lily's enhancement must have worn off by now. This wasn't neuromance anymore; she was on her own.

"This isn't easy, okay? A salesman never brings up his own negatives. That's anti-selling. If a client has a problem or complaint, I acknowledge it and try to work it out. But if I start telling you what *I* think is wrong with me, not only could I lose you, I might even stop believing in myself."

"I'm sorry; I should've listened before." She leaned her head on his shoulder. "So tell me now."

"Okay, start at the beginning. Ever heard of the new produce?"

"Isn't that the pricey stuff they sell at those food boutiques?"

He nodded. "Here in America we rely on just twenty-four crops for most of what we eat. But there are over twenty thousand edible plants. Oca from South America. Arracacha, it's a cross between celery and carrot. Mamey from Cuba. I've spent a lot of time learning the new produce. It's a specialty market now but it has tremendous potential for breakout. I've developed contacts all over the country."

"This has something to do with us?"

His voice was tight. "You remember Marsha, the one who taught me about selling? Well, her husband Bill owned the company I worked for. Not only did he fire me, but the son of a bitch is still working overtime to keep me from catching on somewhere else. Like this evening, I stopped by World Food across the street. I used to take the manager there out to the stadium—on my tab. But tonight my good friend informs me that his headquarters says I'm nobody and there's nothing he can do for me." He choked back his outrage. "I'm going to beat these guys, Lily, and soon. Only . . ."

"You're out of work?" She sat up, giddy with relief. "You poor thing, that's terrible." It was hard to keep from laughing. "How long?"

"Eight months."

"Steve, you're only twenty-six. It's not like you're Willie Loman. You can find something else to sell."

"Willie Loman? Who's he, some fancy marketing professor? What the hell does Willie Loman know about selling glasswort to Piggly Wiggly?"

"Nothing." She slipped her hand onto his knee and squeezed. "Forget it." She didn't want him angry at her, too.

"I gave up my life once, Lily," he said firmly. "What I learned from that is I never want to do it again. But now you know that the real reason I didn't want to go to the fourth floor was that I couldn't afford to. Believe me, if I had money to spend, you'd see all of it. When we were down by the stream, I kept thinking how it would be to take you upstairs to one of the rooms." He reached into his pocket. "Problem is my cash card flamed out two weeks ago." He pulled a crumpled two dollar bill taut, smoothed it against his leg and offered it to her. "My life savings."

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"You have no money at all? Then why come to a place like this? How'd you even get in?"

"Because the most important sales trick of all has nothing to do with the prospect. See, a salesman has to keep up his own self-image. When everyone else is beating him down, he has to treat himself like a winner. Maybe I'm broke, but I'm *not* nobody, damn it. I'm Steve Beauchamp; I go where I want, when I want." He straightened. "Anyway, I talked my way into a discount because I didn't get enhanced. Even so, they took almost everything I had at the door."

"You didn't get enhanced!"

"Didn't need to." He took her hand; his palm was moist. "I know this sounds strange, but when I came out of World Food and saw you with your friend, something happened. I can't explain it, but I thought, there's a woman I need to meet. So I followed you in. Believe me, Lily, I've never done anything like this before. When I saw you again in the lobby, I knew I was right. So what if the cost of admission flattened me? By then I was already falling in love."

"You were not." She pulled away from him. "You didn't even know me."

"I *do* now." He smiled.

"My God, Steve, this doesn't make any sense." She wasn't sure how she was supposed to react; it was like her recurring nightmare of sitting down to a final she hadn't studied for. This man she wanted was either a phony or a pathological romantic. "Just what did you think was going to happen after my enhancement wore off? Most couples leave this place in separate cars, you know."

"Sure, I knew that was a possibility." He shrugged. "But I had confidence in myself. And you. The way I figure it, there must be *something* about me you really like because I couldn't afford a treated chocolate." He sifted her hair through his fingers. "Actually, I've been waiting all night for the drugs you took to wear off. I want us to fall in love for real, not because our hormones are boiling over. We need clear heads for something as important as this. That's why you should never close in a bar, unless you're prepared to wake up with a sour head and a sour deal."

"You really think we're in love?"

He paused to consider. "Maybe I don't know enough about love to recognize it, but this is what I hoped it would feel like."

She turned her face toward him and closed her eyes. "Sell it to me," she said.

He obliged. Time passed, clothing got rearranged, buttons were unbuttoned. The bench wasn't big enough for them to lie on, but they were approaching horizontality when a rover disguised as a sunflower crunched down the gravel path, aimed its enormous yellow blossom at

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them and said politely, "For those couples requiring privacy, may we suggest our encounter rooms on the sixth floor?"

"We could leave," Lily said breathlessly. "Go to your place."

"I don't have a place. Actually I've been living out of my car. It's parked about ten blocks from here and it's out of gas and I don't get my unemployment check until . . ."

"Ssh!" She put a finger to his lips. "Keep bringing up negatives and you'll lose the sale." Lily stood, reached both hands down to him and pulled him up beside her. "My place then." She wasn't sure exactly what she was going to do when they got there. Tack a sheet to the ceiling between her futon and Marja's? Not a simple project at two in the morning—and what if Steve snored?

Lily pushed her doubts away. What had Marja said? Love makes all things possible. She knew she was taking a risk with this intense little man, but she'd been smart and lonely for so long. She had to laugh at herself as they stepped into the elevator.

It was time to try something stupid. ●

FROM:
A CHILD'S GARDEN OF GRAMMAR

THE AGREEMENT OF PREDICATE PRONOUNS

"If you were me . . ." the lad began.
"But that can't be, my little man.

You must be *I* with verbs like were."
He heaved a sigh. "If I were *her* . . ."

"Then you'd be *she*. Let me explain:
The verb 'to be'—" "You're such a pain!

Suppose that I said I were *you*?"
"Then you'd be I, and that would do."

"But you're just who I would not be."
"That may be true, but we'd agree,

And that is what pronouns must do.
You're not me. But—I could be you."

—Tom Disch

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Tanith Lee

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a power so horrifying
it ravishes even the undead. . . .
Last December, Doll Books published
the first novel in the author's
Scarabae Blood Opera, *Dark Dance*,
and this September they will release
a new novel, *Heart-Beast, The Book of the Mad*,
Ms. Lee's fourth novel in her Secret Books
of Paradys series, is just
out from Overlook.

Art: Alan M. Clark

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This story is for Louise Cooper, who played me the music, and told me who they were.

Pierre was burned at Bethelmai; I helped them light the fire.

Parts of the town were already burning, and under cover of that, and the general sack, we had gone about our own business. There had been no real pay for months and Bethelmai was full of trinkets, particularly in the houses around the church, and there were the cellars of wine and the kitchens that still had chickens and loaves despite five weeks of siege. And there were the plump, cream-fed women. Duke Walf's boys were well occupied. There should have been room enough for anything.

I had found an old narrow house in a by-way that the onslaught had either missed or else run over and left behind. Probably not the latter, for though there were signs of upset, broken pots, a few coins scattered from a chest, the hurried household may have made a mess in getting out. Upstairs someone was moving, or maybe only breathing. I climbed the stair and pushed open the door. Into the gloom of the chamber from a slit of window a light ray fell from the smoking town, and lit a pair of brown-amber eyes wide with fright.

"Don't rape me," she said, and then a fragment of bad Latin, the kind you hear all over a camp before the assault, prayer in pieces. She was obviously a servant, abandoned, only about fourteen years old.

"No. I won't do that."

I went right over and sat beside her on the wooden bed of her deserting master and mistress. I took her hand. Of course I reeked of the fight, metal and blood and smoke, but not of lust. I was only thirsty.

There was a tiny silver ring on her wrist.

"Don't take it," she said. "It's all I've got."

"No, I won't take it."

I raised her hand to my mouth, and moved the ring up a little, away from the vein. I put my mouth there, and sucked at the flesh, letting my saliva numb her, the way it does. And I crooned in my throat. She became still and soft, and when I bit into the vein she never flinched, only sighed once.

It was some while since I had had blood. That is the way of it. The campaigns are often long and it will be difficult to get anything. The battles make up for this, affording as they usually do so many opportunities.

The nourishment went into me and I could feel it doing me good, better than wine and meat. But I did not take too much, and when I finished I tore her sleeve and bound up the wound. They rarely remember.

She was drowsy, and I kissed her forehead and put some of the coins from the chest downstairs into her hand.

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"Stay up here till nightfall. Then go carefully, and you might sneak away." There was nowhere much for her to fly to, in fact, for the countryside had been shaved bald by Walf's hungry vicious troops. Still, she must take her chance. It is all any of us can do.

Downstairs I worked a touch more damage on the hall, and gathered up the last coins from the chest, the lock of which I smashed with my dagger-hilt for good measure. It now looked for sure as though the soldiers had already been through and there would be nothing remaining to filch.

Outside I went looking for a drink of wine. I felt strong, alert, and clean now, the way we do after living blood. With bright clear eyes I viewed the smoldered roofs, and on the ground the occasional corpse, and many looted objects cast aside. Walf's happy men were throwing down treasures from upper windows and over walls. The mailed soldiers swaggered, drunk, round the streets, toasting the Duke, and now and then some of the captains rode by on their steaming horses, trailing Walf's colors proudly, as if something wonderful had been done. Dim intermittent thuds and crashes, shouts, and the continual high cries of women, thickened and smirched the air.

Bethelmai was hot from the fires, although outside winter had set in on the plains and hills. Bollo had said it would be snow before the week was out and he was seldom wrong. God help them then, all the towns and villages Duke Walf had cracked. Where next? There had been talk of Pax Pontis to the north. That was greater than Bethelmai and might require some months of siege. From somewhere Walf would have to get more cash and further provisions, or his toasting proud army would desert him. So I was thinking, idling along with a wine-skin I had pulled off an addled soldier, not realizing that none of this would presently concern me.

It was when I came out into the square before the church that I beheld a secondary commotion was going on, and Pierre was in the midst of it. Walf's men had him by both arms, and all across the distance I could see the scarlet marker, like the kiss of a rose, on his mouth.

Up on the church steps, before the broken gaping door, some of Walf's officers were standing, looking on. But all around the pillaging soldiers scurried, not noticing what happened with Pierre, supposing it possibly some breach of petty discipline peculiarly upheld, as often happens, in the middle of a riot.

Then big-bellied Captain Rotlam came at me, pushing his beaked, scarred and scowling face forward like an angry, oddly-neckless goose.

"You, Maurs. That's your man there. You see, the one my fellows have got."

"I see, Captain. Yes, he's one of mine."

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"Stinking mercenaries," said Rotlam. He spat at my boot. No matter. It had had worse on it today, and several times. "You God-cursed filthy thieves," he enlarged. "Taking the Duke's pay," I wondered what pay he meant, "skulking—have you even killed anything this morning, aside from your own fleas? Any enemy?"

I said, "Shall I bring you their severed hands?"

"Eh? Shut your mouth. That bastard there. Your scum. Do you know what we caught him at?"

I knew. Already and quite well I knew, and my heart, which had been high, was growing cold. It had happened before, and when it did, there was not much that could be done. We all understood that. Even Arpad the hothead, and Yens the grumbler, and melancholy, colicky Festus. You must take your chance. All luck runs dry at last, like every river, now or tomorrow or at World's End.

But I said, scowling back, "What's Pierre done?"

"Pierre is it? Don't you know he's a stinking blasphemous witch?"

I crossed myself. I make my mistakes but am not a fool.

"Yes, God guard us—" Rotlam gestured at his men to bring my one forward, and they dragged Pierre, pulling him off his feet, so by the time they reached us he was kneeling.

His dark eyes moved up to mine above the red mouth. Poor lost Pierre. Dead brother to be. But I had my other brothers to consider, and my own damnable skin.

"Well," I said roughly, "What's this? What have you been doing in God's name?"

"Nothing, Maurs," said Pierre. He added expertly, and hopelessly, "there was this boy, he had a gold chain hidden, and when I tried to get it off him, he went for me like a mad dog. I fought him off but I couldn't get my knife—so I bit him. In the neck. It stopped him. Then the Captain's soldiers found us, and for some reason—"

"He was drinking the boy's blood," broke in the man who had Pierre by the left arm. He shook the arm as if to get it free of the socket and Pierre yelped. "Accursed demon shit!" the soldier shouted. He was terrified, all the drink gone to venom.

"He wanted to kill this bastard on the spot," said the other man, "but I said, bring him to the Captain."

"Oh, by God," I said, sounding amused, amazed, my heart like the snow Bollo had told me was coming. "By God, can't my fellow defend himself without—"

"He drank the boy's blood," said the calm soldier stolidly, staring at me. "If you'd seen, you'd believe. Or have you seen, sometime, and not minded?"

At that Rotlam punched me in the chest.

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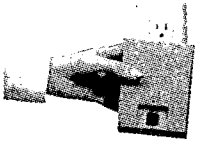

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"Eh? Answer that, Maurs, you bit of muck."

I straightened up and shrugged. "These two are drunk out of their wits. What do they know?"

There was some shouting then, and the calmer of the soldiers drew his sword on me and I knocked him flat. Then Rotlam hit me and I had to take it, since he was one of the marvellous Duke's astounding captains. Pierre by this time had lowered his head. When the noise lessened, I heard him murmur, "Let me go, Maurs. My fault. Who cares. I've had enough."

"What's the devil say?" roared goose-face Rotlam, hissing and bubbling.

"God hears, not I," I said. "I don't know this man well. You'd better get a priest. See what he says."

So, like Peter before Cockcrow, I gave my friend over to oblivion. And like Peter I sweated chill and was full of darkness.

They made quite a show of it, calling all the troops they could prize from the sack, setting up a sort of court. Examining Pierre. There were three greasy priests, rats who had been busy enough themselves on Bethelmai's carcass until called off. The Duke's bastard looked in upon the "trial", but did not bother to stay. Bollo and I were asked questions, and Johan, who had been Pierre's companion on various forays, and Festus and Lutgeri, who had been with Pierre getting in over the fallen gates of the town. We all said we did not know Pierre that well, for he had not been with us very long. He had come out of the night to our fire that summer, just before we offered our swords to the Duke. And as we said this rubbish, I watched Pierre slightly nodding to himself. Once, long, long ago, at a similar scene, I had wept, and nearly implicated myself. But the tears dry like the luck and the fucking rivers.

In the end, Pierre was pronounced demon-possessed, a witch. He admitted it, because otherwise they would have broken his fingers, lashed him, done other choice things. They made up a makeshift but efficient pyre, with a pole in the center that had been a cross-beam of some house. They pushed Pierre up and bound him. He looked at me, and his eyes said *Curse me now*. So we cursed him, and asked the priests for help and penances, and what prayers to say, since we had been all summer and fall in Pierre's deadly company. The priests were sweet. They took our spoils of gold from Bethelmai and instructed us to abstain from wine and women, and meat. To beg from God morning and evening. And such clever methods.

When they set fire to the wood, I ran and flung a torch into the sticks, howling. My men cheered and spat upon Pierre. He looked down at us from beyond the smoke. He was a beautiful boy, seeming not more than twenty, with a face to charm the girls, and, come to that, the Dukes of

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this earth. He knew every foul name we called him was a prayer, and every gob of spit a cry for his forgiveness.

In the end he screamed in agony, and forgot us all.

They say the fire is cold. I heard it once—*So cold! So cold!*

It would be easy to abstain from meat after all.

When he was gone and the flames sank and gave way, and they had raked about and made sure that nothing had lived in them, they sprinkled the place with holy water.

Soon after, Rotlam the goose told us to get going. We were to have no pay—what pay?—and to take nothing from the town—the priests had had most of it. I argued, since not to do so would seem strange and perhaps suspicious. "We fought hard and well for Duke Walf." But Rotlam laughed, and that in a ring of swords.

From the hills above the plain we glanced back, but Bethelmai was still burning, although Pierre had finished.

"May they eat their own flesh and vomit their own guts," said Arpad.

"They will," said Lutgeri. "They all do in the end."

I thought of the girl with a fawn's amber eyes, and if she would escape the town. To think of Pierre was a more terrible thing I must come to softly. For he was all the others who had died, and he was also all of us. No one spoke to me as we tramped across the hills, with the smut of Bethelmai upon our hides and the blood of Bethelmai in our bellies, and Pierre's death our banner.

Bollo had been right about the snow. It came like a great grey bird from the heart of the sky. The whiteness fell like petals. So cold. So cold.

"There'll be wolves," said Gilles.

"So, wolves are nothing," said Johan stoically.

There are always two schools of thought with wolves. One says they are fiends who will tear you up as you sleep and chew your genitals till you wake shrieking. The other school, which from experience is mine, will tell that wolves seldom attack a moving man, or a sleeping man for that matter. Once Johan was relieving himself in a winter field and a wolf appeared and stared at him. The eyes of wolves are human, and Johan was costive for three days. But when he shouted at the wolf it fled.

In any case, we did not hear their song, up on the lean white hills. We heard nothing. The world had died. Good riddance.

Once, from a height, we saw a town far off, walls and towers, and when the dark began, that buzz of half-seen light, all the candles, torches, hearths, all the dreams and desires of the hive. Yens said that he thought the town was Musen, but we did not know, and hated it only dimly, like the distance.

After about two days, we began to talk of Pierre. We recalled things

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he had said and done, how he had been a friend, how he had enraged us. Those of us who recollected the first meeting between us spoke of that. It was true he had come to the campfire in the night, but that was a century ago. He found us by stealth and the magic of our kind. Our brotherhood of blood is old and uncanny, but we are like the wolves. Timid, lonely. Our pack cleaves to itself. We prey only where we can. And we too have human eyes.

In the dark white of the snow, Johan said to me, "You talked about bringing Rotlam the severed hands of those you killed. Was that unwise? Does it give away something? The Egyptians by the Nilus did that. Suppose you chatter to a scholar."

"Then I'm done for, Johan. One day."

Yes, no fool, but I make mistakes, and who does not?

Pierre. . . .

It was not he had been my lover, or like some son I had never seen. He was myself. And to each of us, he was that.

Lutgeri may be the oldest of us. Sometimes he dreams of painted icons in a hut of logs, and smoke, and a hymn that brought the light.

As we age, we lose the nearer past a little, as any old man does.

For the rest, it is lies. The sun does not smite us, nor the moon by night. Garlic is a fine flavor. Thorns rip but that is all. Iron and silver—we have had both, and lost both. And for the cross of the Christ? Well, He was one of us, or so Pierre once said. Did they not drink blood?

But kill us, we die. Burn us, we are ashes.

Ah, Pierre. . . .

And so, through the death of Pierre, we wandered, a band of mercenaries without a lord, scavengers on the winter land, wolves, crows. And so, we saw the castle.

Maybe we would have turned to it our shoulders, but the hour was sunset, and in the sunset we saw this place, on a sky as red as blood and threaded with gold like the robe of a priest.

The castle looked black. Not a light, not a glim to be glimpsed.

"Perhaps there is some count or duke there," said Arpad, "who wants men to serve him. Wants to take some city in the spring. The rotten old bastard. He'll feed us."

"And women," said Festus.

"Gorgeous women, white as the snow, with sweets for tits and cores of roses." This, Gilles.

We scanned the landscape for a village or town, some settlement to support the castle, and there was none. Under the snow, and the blood of crimson dying sun, nothing moved.

"A ruin," said Yens. "Taken, despoiled. Empty."

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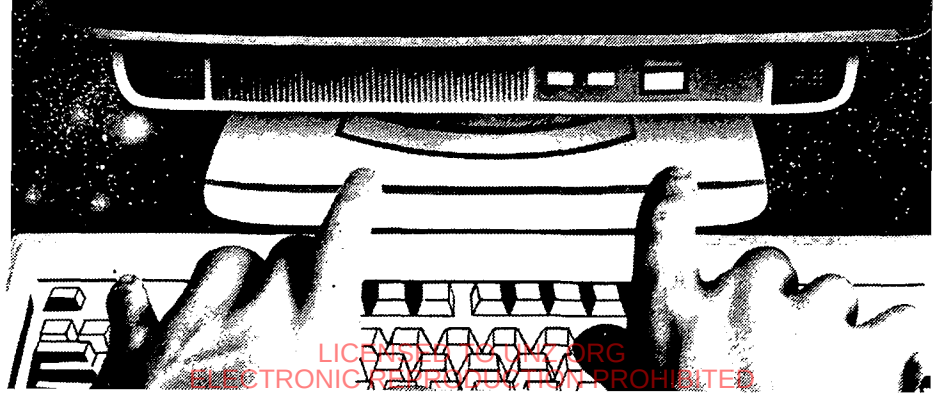

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"We'll go and see." Arpad.

"Winter in a ruin. Not for the first." Johan.

But we sat on the hill, slept by the fire. In the dawn we looked down again, and now the castle was not black but warm, the sun's rays on it over the cloth of the snow.

If we had had his body, we would have buried him here, at this castle, our brother Pierre. But we did not have a mote of black dust.

Lutgeri said, "Pierre would have liked that place. He'd have waxed lyrical. Remember how well he sang. A troubadour."

We thought of Pierre under the long thin windows of the castle, singing to some princess of story.

As we descended we found the snow was deep. We were pulled in and hacked our way out. It was another battle. Under the snow, Hades, a Hell of ice.

When we began to get level with the castle, we looked it over again. It was not so large. Some big towers with crenellations, and an inner block, high-roofed and capped by snow, with one slender squinnying tower all its own. Up there, a stab of light went through a window, rose-red, deathly green as a dying thorn.

"By the Christ," said Johan.

We stopped.

"What's that, by the Mass?"

"Flowers," said Gilles.

"No."

There could be no flower in the snowlands.

"Remember—" said Arpad, "remember what Pierre called it—the battlefield—"

Memory again. We had once come to a place, the plain of a war, in the snow, years back. And on the plain, left to God and the carrion birds, were the dying men, and the blood leaking from their bodies, red on the white. A feast. A horrible and cursed feast we were then too desperate to ignore.

And Pierre had named the sight.

"The blood in the sunlight on the snow," he said. "Red roses. Winter flowers."

"Flowers in winter," said Arpad now, so low only we could have heard him, and we did.

There was something blooming along the walls of the castle, and it looked like flowers. Winter flowers. Roses.

"There's nothing like that," said Johan. "We—*we* are the legend."

We laughed.

We forced our way on towards the castle.

* * *

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There is a tradition of Maryam, the Virgin Mother of the Christ: That she has a garden enclosed by high walls. And in the garden it is always summer and the flowers grow.

Had we come to the Garden of Maryam?

As the castle's barriers loomed up over us, we searched walks and towers with our gaze. But there was no sentry. No one called a challenge. We came up to the doors—and they stood ajar. This was curious and foreboding in itself, but we had seen such things; the bizarre is not always dangerous, just as sometimes, the ordinary is.

They were huge heavy doors too, with valves of iron like black stone. We went in, and there was the castle yard, save it was not. It was this garden.

The snow was on the ground, and on the steps that went to the towers, and to the central place with its tall snowy roof. But out of the snow of the yard, the flowers climbed on their briars up the high walls, up to the very tops, a curtain of dark green and lavish reds, of smoky pinks and peaches too, of murrey and magenta and ivory. Here and there the snow had even touched the faces of these flowers, but it had not burnt them. It was only like a dusting of white spice. And they had scent. In the cold static air it was rich and heady.

Gilles said, "Oh God, it's beautiful. Will it poison us?"

"Yes," said Festus. He wrenched out his knife and made a move toward the rose-vines. Johan caught his arm. Lutgeri said softly, "Better not. You might anger . . . someone."

"Who?" snapped Festus.

"God, perhaps," said Lutgeri. "If He's gone to so much trouble."

In the middle of the yard was a stone well, ornamented with upright stone birds. I crossed to the well, Johan and Arpad coming with me. Deep down the water was shining green as a Pope's jasper ring, though along the coping speared icicles.

Up on the battlements nothing stirred but a trace of wind, blowing off a spray of snow, and perfume.

"Is it magic?" said Gilles.

"Yes," said Bollo. "Like the virgin sleeping in her garden, and only the kiss of God can wake her."

"I don't like it," said Yens, "my guts are changing into snakes."

"That door is open too," said Arpad, pointing up at the central building just over from the well. He strode off towards it. "A nice virgin in a bower. That's no threat to me."

Festus, knife still drawn, went after him.

Johan said, "What do you want to do, Maurs?"

"Look and see. Perhaps the inside is good, too."

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Arpad and Festus had gone through the door. Then Arpad gave a shout, and we ran, all of us, getting the blades free as we did so.

As we burst through the door, it became a silly clowns' performance, for bringing up short Johan, Gilles, Lutgeri and I were collided with by Yens and Bollo.

Arpad and Festus were in the midst of the castle hall, just standing there and gazing about. There was something to look at.

I have seen the house-halls of wealthy dukes and counts and other princes of the world, here and otherwhere. But none better, and few so fine. And probably not one like that one.

There were carpets on the walls from the East, wonderful scarlets and saffrons, and high up the walls were carved, and the ceiling, with beasts and birds. And there were very strange, mythical, women things with the tails of fish and serpents, winged horses, lions with three heads, horned bears, birds with the faces of ancient bearded men. Out of the ceiling dropped brazen lamps on long chains, and they were alight, giving to the wide chamber a deep burnished glow broken only by the flutter of a large and burning hearth. The fireplace was fronted with rosy marble that ran off into a floor formed of squares of this rose marble and another that was of russet. A stair ascended between two statues. The figures were taller than a man, one of a woman holding up a gilded shield or mirror before her countenance, and one of King Death, a robed creature with the head of a skull crowned by gold. The windows that ran above the hall had glass in them, and in each pane was a single ruby jewel. The sun had got now behind three of these, and the bloody drops fell down to the room, directly on Death's diadem and robe. We took this sour omen in like vinegar.

Near the hearth, however, was a table set with chairs. The table was also laid with flagons and jars and jugs, with plates and knives, and the light danced on the gold-work. There were roasts on that table, pork and hare, a wide side of beef. And on the plates piled up the plaited pies and loaves, the sweetmeats you see and never taste, the mounded summer fruits like balls of enamel and gold. The fruit was fresh and ripe, the bread and meat were hot, you could smell them.

"What is it?" said Gilles.

"It's the Devil," said Yens.

Arpad had wandered to the table and stretched out his hands.

"No, fool," I shouted. "*No.*"

Arpad put his hands down by his sides. He blushed.

Bollo said, "It's so miraculous it might be sound. It might be a gift from on high."

"But is it?" I said.

Bollo shrugged.

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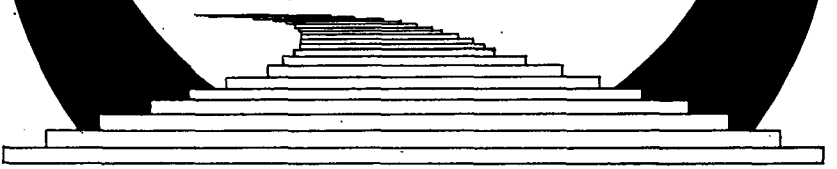

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Festus said, "Well, what do we do?"

"We'll search this hold," I said, "and then we'll see if it's fit to banquet in."

And so we searched the building, the hub of the little castle on the plain of snow, the castle of summer and lit lamps and bright fire and new-cooked food.

It was uniformly splendid. It was beautiful. Everywhere the carvings, that had to do it seemed with every myth and fantasy of the earth. Wherever there was a window, it was glass, and in many of them was a gem of colored vitreous, or the delicate pattern of grisaille. Tapestries and carpets on the walls, gleaming with luster and tints as if sloughed from the loom only yesterday. Above the hall was a library with old, old books and scrolls in Latin and in Greek, and some even in the picture writing of earlier lands. An armory there was, its door open like all the rest. The weapons were antique and modern, well-cared for, the leather and lacquer oiled and rubbed, the iron shined. Bows of horn, bronze maces, lances notched like the swords from use. . . .

There were side chambers with sumptuous beds, and carved chests that, when they were easily undone, revealed the clothes of lords folded among herbs, and belts inlaid with gold. In caskets were found the jewelries of queens and kings, corals and pearls, amethysts like pigeons' blood, brooding garnets, crosses of silver pierced by green beryl, and from the East again armlets of heavy gold, headdresses of golden beads and discs, things the Herods might have looked on, worn.

"Take none of this."

"No, Maurs," they said.

Johan said, "I think it is a spell after all."

"Yes, a stink of a spell, to entrap us."

We said we would be better going at once, hunting the lean hills for mice, sleeping in the snow about a pale fire. Yet we were in love with the castle, as if with a beautiful woman. She may mean you no good and yet you hang about her. Perhaps you can charm the bitch, perhaps her heart is fair like her face, and needs only to be persuaded.

From the upper chambers we glared out beyond the castle walls and the snow was teeming once again. The day was dark now as evening, and how thoughtful the sorcery of the castle was, lighting all its lamps for us, in every room, and on the stairs the torches in their ornamented brackets.

At last we were weary of it, sick of it. Too many sweets and none to be eaten.

Then, we reached a door that did not give.

"What's *this?*"

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"It could lead into that tower we spied," said Johan, "so I'd guess. With the pretty window."

Glancing up, I saw, carved in the stone above the door, the words: *Virgo pulchra, claustra recludens.*

"Lovely maiden, undo the bolt," translated Bollo.

"Does it only mean a girl?" said Yens. "Isn't it invoking the Mother of God?"

"It's all we need," said Gilles, "lovely maidens."

"No, one other thing," said Lutgeri.

"Blood," I said.

There was a silence, under the locked door.

"Perhaps this place will give us that, too," said Johan. "Since it offers everything else."

We examined each other.

Arpad's eyes glittered, and the eyes of Gilles were heavy. Yens frowned and gnawed his lip, Festus had turned away, and Bollo was blank as a worn page in one of the ancient books. Lutgeri and Johan seemed to be thinking, gazing down some tunnel of memory or the mind. And I? I recollected Pierre. And after him, the girl in the house at Bethelmai, who had wanted the impossible—to be spared rape, to keep her bracelet.

"We'll go down," I said.

"The food—" said Arpad, and Yens added, "I'm hungry enough I'd risk hemlock."

When we regained the hall, the fire was still as bright, its logs and sticks had not burnt up, and the lamps were glowing. But on the table, quite naturally, the feast had turned a little cold and greasy. We cut off chunks of meat and sliced the fruits and broke off the caps of the crystalline castle. There was no smell or appearance of anything bad, no taste, no evidence. We drew lots, and Arpad and Yens gladly tried the dishes, a mouthful of this and that. We would be likely to save them, if they had not had much. But then they did not sicken, and by the time the occluded sun had passed over to the other windows, we sat square at the table and gorged ourselves like the poor slaves of life we were.

I woke afraid. But that is not so unusual.

There are dreams, unrecalled. There are noises heard in sleep, quite innocent, that remind the floating brain of other times when they were not—

I pushed myself up and my head rang slightly from the draughts of precious wine. Then it cleared and I remembered where I had lain down, and why, and that to fear might be quite wise.

Yes, the very image before me was one of alteration and so perhaps of warning.

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The lamps had all gone out, and the changeless fire was sunken low, livid hovering lizard tongues on the remnants of the wood like blackened bones. Outside, beyond the enchanted castle, the weather seemed purified. The snow had been vomited out, and the sky was a sheer thin blackish-blue, threadbare with stars. This, through the high up windows of the hall, gave the light the lamps now withheld. The moon must be up.

I scrutinized the vast chamber and saw it all congealed in slabs of lunar ice. The great table ruined by our orgy of hunger. The carvings and the carved cupboards, the carpets hung on the walls with here and there some sequin of pallor, a hand, a unicorn, a skull.

No one was in the room but I, yet someone had been there. Who? Most of my brotherhood had gone up to slumber in the haughty, luxurious beds of the castle. I had put Johan to watch at the stair-head, and Lutgeri and Festus to stroll the passages in a pair. The hall door we had bolted. And I had rolled myself to sleep before the fire in my cloak, with one of the fancy cushions under my head.

If something had happened, I would have heard a commotion.

But, by the Christ, something had happened. My heart and my soul knew it, if my stupid mind did not.

I got on my feet all the way, and went to the table. The wine had been unvenomous, and I took a drink of it, to steady me.

What had been in the hall with me was a whisper, a gliding sigh. Probably not that which had woken me at all, this cobweb of nothingness, this ghost. No, some deep instinct, clamoring, had reached me finally after a long while. It was as if a bell had been clanging in my blood and I had only just heard it—then, it stopped.

I did not call for the sentries, Lutgeri, Festus, Johan. Surely they should have woken me by now, and Yens and Bollo, to take our turn.

How silent the castle, and the land beyond. Rarely is anything so dumb. The wind calls, and the beasts that roam the night. And in the dwellings of men the rats and vermin move about, the timbers stir, the furniture creaks. Here—not a note. Only I had made a sound, and that not much.

I drew my sword, and my knife for the left hand. Then I climbed the stair, between Death and his Lady, noiseless, seeing.

Johan was not above. That was not like him. If he had gone from his post it was because something had summoned him. And then, certainly, he would have alerted me.

"Johan," I said, quietly. And he would have heard. But there was no answer, and beyond the windows there, the dark was full.

I went into it, that dark. One learns to use one's eyes, and so sight

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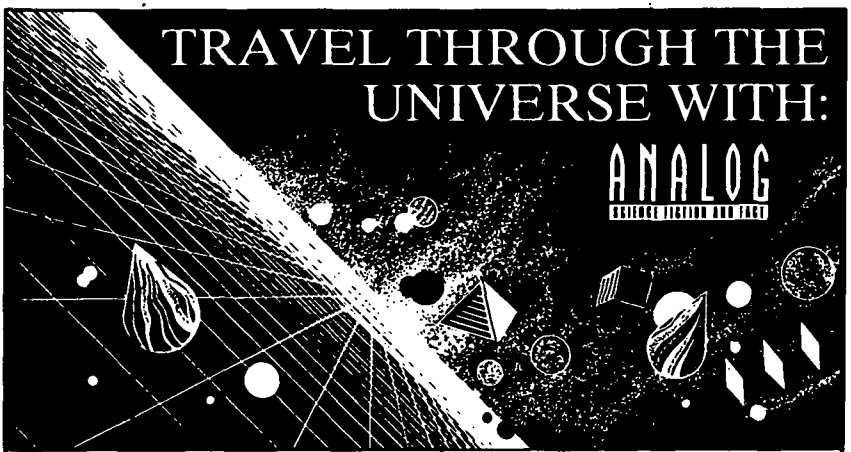

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grudgingly came. I beheld the twisting passageway, and there a door. And there, something lay on the threshold.

For more than three hundred years, I knew him. He did not sleep unless he might. And now, he did not sleep. Across the door of the room Arpad had chosen, Johan lay dead.

This was not new to me. Yet never does it grow stale. To find your friend and brother is a corpse.

I bent over him, one ear, one eye upon the dark, and tried him.

Oh Christ—Oh, he was not a human thing any more. No, no. He was a sack of emptiness. A rattling sack filled by loose bones. Like the picture of Death, whose cart is stacked by the skeletons of the dead that have a tiny, immodest fragment of skin on them. Like that. Johan. So.

I let go of him, and held down my screaming. I am practiced. And since that night, better.

There were no muscles left in his body, no *flesh*. I had no true light, and yet I *knew*. No *blood*.

In the dark, some demon had come, and sucked him dry. Oh, not as we do. Not like that. You give us sustenance like a maiden at a well, raising the bucket brimmed with water. Like the lord at the dinner, offering us wine. A drink. The drink of life. And with the woman or boy who sucks the smooth sword of our cock, tender and cunning, careful and fierce and honey in the dark, and with the girl who takes in our seed at her other mouth, and grows in the closed garden of her womb a rose: So it goes back to you. *But not like this.*

He had been drained. As the fire does it. Like Pierre. Save that burnt inward, and this, *out*.

No longer Johan.

I turned and opened Arpad's selected door, and stepped into the chamber.

Moonlight streamed here on the floor and over the bed, in a white mirror from the window, and in its heart a black cicatrix lay from the decaying window jewel the moon could not rouse.

Arpad sprawled half from the majestic bed he had chosen. His head drooped to the floor, and one arm, and when I tried him, Arpad, who had been sparks and pepper, hot iron and strong drink, Arpad was another flaccid sack on the cart of Death.

Then a fear came over me I had never felt. Not once, in all my long life. I have been pent and pinned, they have promised me all sorts of torture, and Hell after, and never once, no never had I felt this fear. It was born in me that night. Shall I ever be free of it?

I left Arpad, and Johan, and walked out along the passage.

In their brackets the kind torches had guttered out. Only the moon slid through the narrow slits, each with that mole of dark on it from its

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jewel, or else weird shapes from the painting on the flags. And then the corridor turned any way, and the moon had gone behind a wall. White Face they called her, long ago. She is fickle, and not your helpmeet. A betrayer, Dame Moon.

I came on Festus not long after. And then Lutgeri. Festus too was in the bone cart of Death. And I gave Lutgeri a shake, like a rat, but I hated him because he was dead. And then I heard him breathing, rasping and interrupted, like a rusty machine, some windmill, or thing of the old sieges they cannot make any more.

"Lutgeri—Lutgeri—"

"Hush," he said, "calmly, my boy."

I held him in my arms.

"If you die, you shit-rat, I'll kill you."

"I know you will, Maurs. I'll try not to."

I wept on his shoulder which had the feel of life and humanity. One whole second. Then I was myself again.

"What did this?"

"How many?" he gasped.

"Arpad, Festus—Johan—"

"Ah," he said, "Johan."

Then he lost consciousness and I squeezed on his neck, against the vein, to haul him back.

"Tell me, Lutgeri."

"I can't. I don't—something came from the shadow. It was like—no, it was like nothing at all. It didn't croon. And it hurt me. Christ's soul. Its teeth went in my breast—and the blood was ripped from me, Maurs, like my living organs, before I could struggle. And no voice in my throat."

"How do you survive?" I said. I was numb.

"God knows. Perhaps my old ichor wasn't to its taste, or a little did for more."

"The others," I said.

Lutgeri whispered, "Arpad? Festus—yes. Yens and Gilles—they must be gone if it came to them. Bollo, perhaps—old alligator. He might—"

His head fell back. He had fainted again, but still lived. I crushed my wrist between his teeth. "Drink it, you swine, you shit-heart. *Drink it.*"

In his stupor, he took a morsel from me.

Then, in my arms, he drew his sword.

"Leave me here, Maurs. I'm ready for it now. If it returns. But you must—"

"Yes." I got up. I raised him and slung him over my shoulder and took him into the library. Its lamp was out. I fetched down a book and pressed it on his hand. "When the weight changes, if it grows—"

"I know, Maurs. Then I'm lighter. I have the sword. Go find them. *Go.*"

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* * *

Bollo had gone to sleep in the armory. That was, he had told me he would be there, to examine the weapons alone. He had not meant to sleep, and took with him a jar of the wine from the table. He could go days and nights, up to ten, without sleeping. I had seen it. But then, why battle the god of slumber here? I ran, up the stairs, up into the height of the place, to reach Bollo.

When I was near the door, something laid hold of me, and made me pause. I went slowly after that, the drawn sword and knife before me. I crept to the door of the armory, and it was partly open, as all the doors of the castle seemed to wish to be, but one, the virgin door to the tower.

I eased the armory door inward. So I saw.

Lovers making love cannot always stop.

There was a window, and the moon was in it, it was an arch of light, with only the dark Mark of Cain upon its forehead from the intercepting jewel. More than enough light to see.

Bollo sat at the table, one of the old books open in front of him from below, and a mace, and a candle that had been burning and which had gone out. Moonlight described the weapon, and the book, a great capital of gilding and indigo, and on it a gem of blackness that, in daylight, would have been red.

The eyes of Bollo were wide, and stiffly, like the cogs of a machine, they crawled in their sockets, till he could look at me. He knew me, he was coherent, but paralyzed.

While it bent over him, obscuring him as a cloud will the moon. It was so filmy, so wraith-like, yet so real.

What did I regard? The sight is printed on my mind. I can never forget, yet how to relate?

It was old, ancient as nothing in the castle was, not even the scrolls penned before the Flood. It was like something made of rags and bones, filaments and tendrils, pasted together, strung, like a harp of the air. Moonlight passed through its wrappings, but not through itself, though dimly in it, stones in a frozen river, you saw the elements of its skeleton like the teeth of a comb. It was, or had been, of human shape. But of what gender, God knew. It held Bollo, beneath the arms, and its head, from which a hank of gauzy hair spun out, was bowed upon his chest.

This looked like a deed of repentance. As if it had gone to him and sobbed on his breast. But I knew, for Lutgeri had told me, what it did.

I rammed my sword into its back, up into the spot where the heart is come on.

And it was like thrusting into snow.

But at the blow it left him, it straightened up, and turning like a snake it gazed on me.

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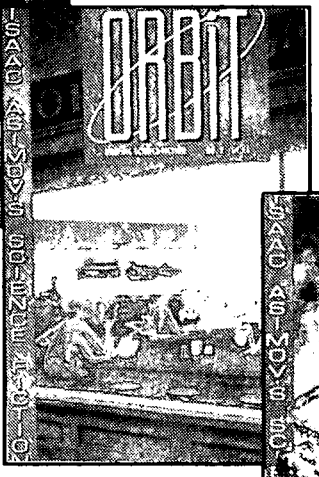

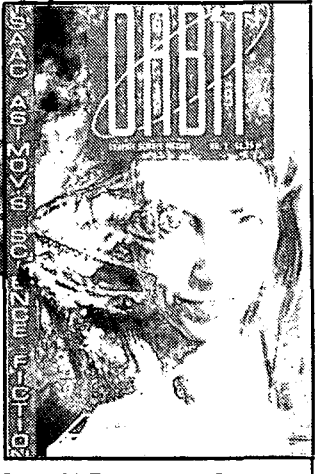

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Oh it had eyes. The eyes of wolves, our own, are human. But these were not. Like round black beads they shone, harder and more true than all the rest of it. Bits of night, but not this night. No night we will ever see.

And then it gaped its mouth, and its sharp yellow teeth were there, and the swarthy tongue, pointed and too long. It hissed at me, and I fell back.

My sword had come from it as if out of sticky vapor.

I hung before it, not knowing what I must do. And then it seemed to me I should strike that weaving insubstantial head from its shoulders. But as I drew my arm for the stroke, it smeared away. It slid, *rolled* at the wall, moving as the snake does. And the wall parted, to let it by.

Yes, like soft butter the stone gave way, and it slipped through. And then Bollo cried to me, as if he choked, "Maurs—there—there—"

And in his eyes I saw the deaths of Yens and Gilles. I saw King Death himself, on his fish-white charger, pacing slowly. Then I turned and flung myself through the wall before it closed. After the vampire.

I have done things in battle, many have, crazy things called after "brave." But they are the madness of war. And this, this was not like them, for I was afraid going in through that wall, and yet could not keep back.

It had come to me, this thing, or others of its kind. That had been the sigh, the whisper, in the dark. But I had woken, before its fangs could fasten into me. And why was that? But then, why ask. Each of us knows he alone is immortal, cannot die. And that whoever falls, he will survive it. Death may touch, but then he is gone.

The corridor inside the wall was black as pitch, and yet I could just see, for as I said I have learned to use my eyes, and besides, what went before me, invisible now in itself, gave off a faint luminescence, like the crests of waves, like fungus, such things.

It progressed quickly, but not as if it went on legs or feet. And the elf-light flowed behind it, and now and then I was close enough a long trailing wisp of its garment, or perhaps *itself* billowed around a turn of the passage, and I might have plucked at it, but I did not.

How to kill it when I caught it. Would beheading do? We were vulnerable, but I had stabbed it through and it lived. Why then follow? I must. Or Bollo had put it on me that I must.

It went somewhere, evidently. To some lair.

Then the corridor began to branch. Constricted twisting routes led off this way and that, and it chose without hesitation, but now I was lost. We were inside the walls of the castle, in the very veins and arteries of it.

The passage ended at the foot of a sort of chimney. I dropped back, and

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beheld the aura of the being oozing up a flight of straight and narrow steps, directly up, and its glow abated as it vanished from sight.

The fear I felt was now so awful I could not for a moment or two more move or go after. And yet it was the fear itself, it seemed, that pushed me on.

Presently I eased out, and looking up into the shaft where the stairway went, saw the thing had completed its climb and gone in at a slender archway above. There was a hint of light inside the arch, but not like the other, the phosphorous of the vampire. This was warm.

I ran up the stair without a sound, and sprang into the arch. Within the vault of it, to the left, was another half-open door, and out of this stole the myrrh-soft shine. It was a gentle light, and by that I began to realize what might be there. Even so, when I had slunk to the doorway's edge, I peered around the door, and found I had not been prepared.

I grasped at once what chamber it was. None other than that upper room in the tower to which the lower outer door had refused us admittance. *Lovely girl, undo the bolt.* Up here, no doubt, she had done so, to let her creature in.

But the room was beautiful, like a painting, so neat and pleasant, every little accessory in its place. The slim white maiden's bed with its canopy of ashy rose, the tapestry of rainbow threads on its frame, the tiring table inlaid with different woods, the unguents and wooden combs, the trickle of a precious necklace from a carven box. There were little footstools with embroidered hounds and rabbits and birds, and on one of these, before her, the vampire I had pursued kneeled now, holding up its mealy hands. I learned here there had been others, three of them, who had taken the lives from my men. These vampires were like the first one, flimsy dolls of silver wire and thinnest samite, and crinkled now, folded over in strange shapes, like things that had no bones at all, like stiff clothing discarded.

She had had their message and their gift already, she had emptied them in turn. And now she received the last of our ichor from the final creature, the one kneeling in front of her, lifting its hands so she might bow her head and bite the powdery wrists and drink, from that transferring vessel, *our blood.*

I moved into the doorway, and so into the room, and stood there, and looked on as she drained the wine-sack dry.

The ceiling was painted violet, with little golden stars. Under the stained glass window, which was black and moonless, only the brazen lamps to give their dulcet light, a rose bush grew in a pot. The great red blooms were open wide and I could smell their scent, and over that the perfume of the girl.

She had a skin like the snow, and hair like ebony, which fell all round

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her, with raven glints in it. Her gown was a pale sweet pink, the shade of fresh blood mixed into ice. There were rings on her fingers, gold, emeralds, and as she lifted her head and let her servant go—it folded, discarded, lifeless, like the others—I saw that around her white forehead passed a golden chain fashioned into tiny flowers.

She had a lovely face. All of her was lovely. Not a flaw. There was not even any trace of blood on the petals of her lips, and her eyes were clear and innocent, the color of dark amber.

"At last you have come to me," she said. "I've waited so long."

"Have you, Lady?"

"Many, many years."

I believed her. I understood it all and did not need a lesson. Nor did I get one. The castle was her web. Probably it was a ruin, and every tasteful glamorous thing inside mildew and muck. God knew what we had eaten off that banquet table. For the rest, when we were lulled, her emissaries came. They filled themselves from us like jars, then glided back to her and gave up every drop to make her strong and fair. What had she been before? A desiccated insect lying, wheezing and murmuring on her charming bed, which maybe was a stinking gaping grave.

And one she wanted as her lover. Perhaps to continue her race through him, if she was the last of that particular kind. Or maybe only to ease her loneliness. Or to champion her, to take her out into the world beyond the web, where she could become a mighty sorceress, out in the thousand lands where blood runs in rivers.

Yet she looked at me and I loved her. Such adoration. She was the Virgin Queen and the fount of all delicious sin. She was my mother and my child, my sister, my soul.

Her magic was strong enough, and she had fed.

She held out her perfect hand to me, and I went forward.

And the lamplight shone through her amber eyes, and I remembered the girl in the upper room, her little ring of silver on her roughened hand. "Don't rape me. Don't take my bracelet." And it came to me as if I heard the words, that the soldiers had found her, or she had stumbled amongst them. They had raped her, they had stolen her solitary treasure, they had thrown her down in the mud among the reeking corpses. So then I saw the corpse of Pierre, his black dust raked over in the dying pyre. I saw the battlefield in the snow, where we had sucked out the life of dying, crying men, the crimson winter roses, since we must. And into us had passed with their life the despair of their death, so the tears froze on our faces with the blood cold against our lips. All that I saw, there in the eyes of the lovely maiden in the tower, and so I saw my brothers she had fed on. Arpad and Yens, Festus and Gilles. Johan. And Lutgeri with the sword, and the book on his hand to remind him to live, and Bollo

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staring. And I saw myself before her, tall and somber as a shadow, with the blade in my hand.

God knows, He has ordained it, we prey upon each other. As the lion on the deer, the cat upon the mouse. There is no penance we may do to right this wrong. There is no excuse for that we live by killing, save only that we must. To survive is all. And she, the maiden, like us was vulnerable, for unlike the automata of her slaves, she was a thing of flesh and blood. My sister, as Pierre had been my brother and myself. And, so beautiful—

The dawn was coming up, sluggish, like heavy iron. No color on the earth. The roses would be burnt papers and the books grey flour, like all the stuff in the upper chamber.

Lutgeri was sharpening his knife, slow. He did not speak to me of the cold grim rooms, the fallen areas and the rotted carpets. But Bollo, who had gone out and broken the thick corded ice of the well, informed me it stank, not fit to drink.

I told them of the girl in the tower. They listened. Before we went to bury our dead in the hard soil beyond the castle, they asked what I had done.

"I loved her, of course," I said. "I never loved any woman like that one. It was her spell."

"So you went to her," said Bollo, but Lutgeri held up his hand, mildly, as if to caution him.

"I went to her," I said.

"And then," Lutgeri said. "And then."

"With my sword I struck the head from her body." ●

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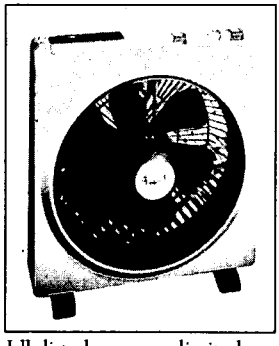

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In the face
of terrible cruelty,
a young man must
try to save himself
and, perhaps, . . .

THE TOAD OF HEAVEN

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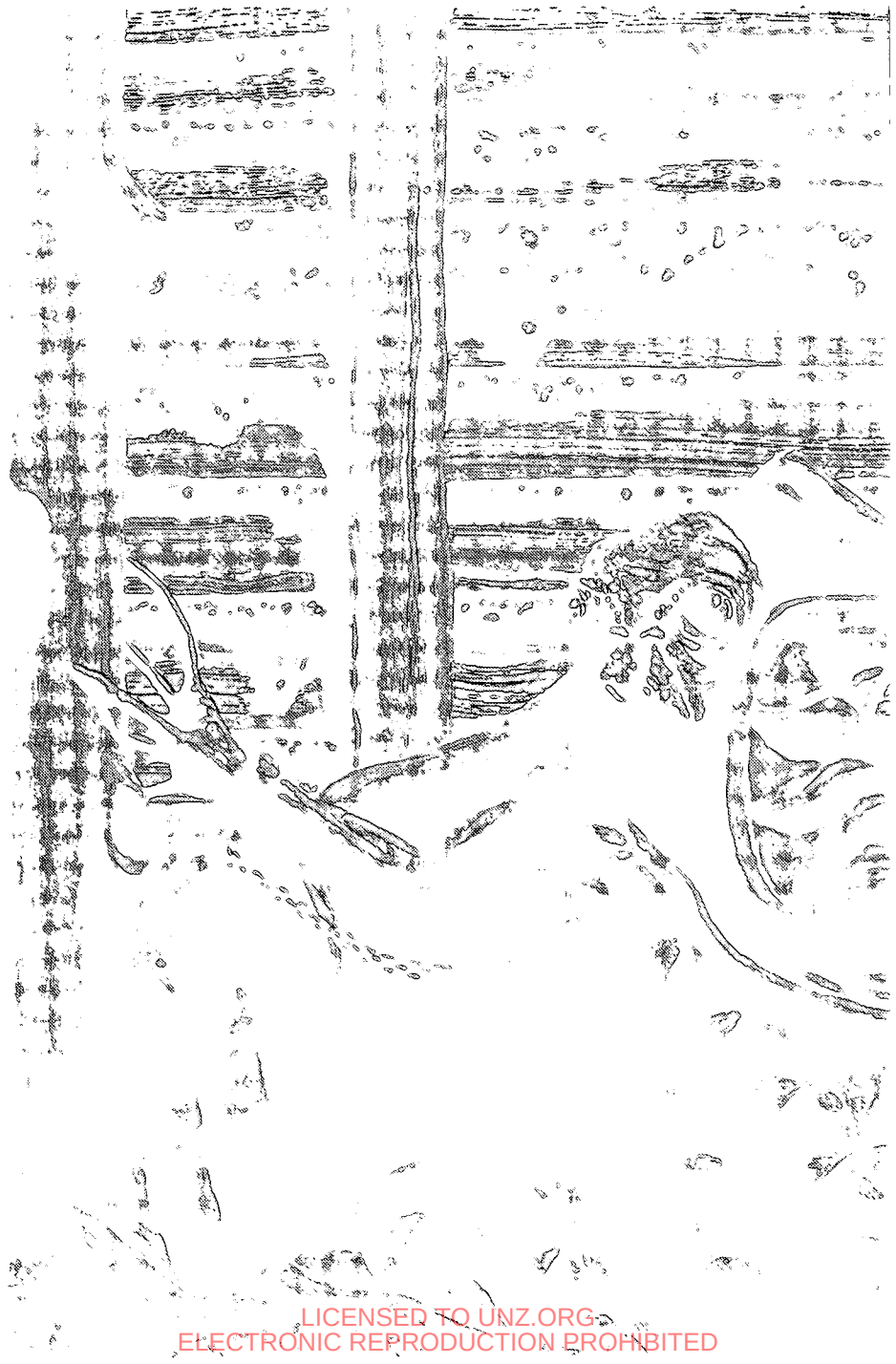

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They saw him as someone who would lose, who would give a few dollars to the pot and who they could dismiss afterward. For good. Quentin was just a kid. Seventeen or eighteen—he wasn't sure of his birthdate—with a young face for any age, unshaved cheeks and big innocent blue eyes. It was the eyes that won him a place at the table, as much as anything, the five men saying, "Sure, join us." They said, "A friendly game of cards." They said, "You know how to play draw poker, don't you? And there's a chair. Glad to have you here, son." Grinning openly, they let Quentin deal the first hand. Which he won, as it happened. He had a sudden feeling that nobody could beat a pair of kings; and the men, suspecting nothing, chalked it up to youth and ignorance, watching him scoop up the pot while they traded little predatory glances on the sly.

Luck was in the air, it seemed, and all of the good luck was Quentin's. He could do nothing wrong. He was dealt two pair and got a powerful feeling, folding before the draw and watching the man across from him win with a straight flush. Another time, he won with those same two pair; and a third time, bluffing with nothing in his hand, he won a huge pot because his opponents were convinced of his infallibility. In the course of the evening, almost without effort, Quentin found himself several hundred dollars richer. It was more money than he'd ever owned, more than he'd ever even touched before, and almost all of it came from those moneyed gentlemen with the sweaty faces and the darkening dispositions. Two were local ranchers, and two more were bankers. The fifth had some sort of stake in the railroad. And he would look at all that respectability, thinking over and over again: *Isn't this fun?*

At one point, for no clear reason, Quentin pulled the gold coins from his winnings, laying them edge to edge and covering a portion of the round table. Oblivious to his little audience, he stared at that gold and felt distant. Cold. A peculiar sense of lightness came into him, and he wasn't staring at coins on a table, no, but at something else, in some other place. He almost knew where it was—a hair's breadth separated him and total understanding—then suddenly they were just coins again, just a lovely plain of yellow metal, and he blinked and sat back and realized that he needed to relieve himself.

Making a pile of his winnings, he said, "Excuse me. I've got to piss."

The gentlemen traded looks, saying nothing. All night, without exception, a gambler would leave his winnings on the table, in plain view, his opponents watching over them in his absence. Quentin assumed that the rules held now. His chair scraped at the wooden floor, and he rose. This was the back room of the town's best bar, and the facilities, what there were of them, were in the alleyway through the back door. Quentin had been drinking, but not too much. He relieved himself where a hundred other men had done the same, summer heat making the urine stink and his eyes water. He thought he saw the back door open again, but nobody came outside. He squinted and saw nobody, then finished and started back. Again he was thinking of the gold, beautiful and sweet. He could see a great glass-smooth plain of the stuff, stars like jewels above him,

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and some kind of elaborate lamp set in the middle of the gold, huge and queer, covered with pipes and seeping a brilliant white light—

—and he was struck from the side, no warning given. Quentin crumpled and felt pain, but not too much; he tried rising to his feet again, hands grabbing at him and someone putting a sack over his head. Again the back door opened. Muffled voices said, "Quiet, be quiet." He recognized them. His hands were tied behind his back, and one of the ranchers—Quentin knew the sullen, sour voice—knelt and informed him, "You were cheating. We don't know how, but you were, you son-of-a-bitch."

Quentin protested. "I wasn't! I just got lucky . . . !"

Someone struck him, but not too hard. These weren't naturally violent men, and they were doing this out of anger and frustration. And a kind of moral outrage too. He had to be cheating; how else could they explain losing so badly to a kid? Nobody could have known how to win every possible hand, unless that nobody had a gimmick. A gimmick and no scruples whatsoever.

Quentin was loaded into a wagon, like cargo, then someone took the trouble to find his horse and tie it to the wagon's back end. A couple of the men drove the wagon out of town, up some nameless road, one of them speaking quietly, with great fury, taking the trouble to explain that cheaters could be hung, nobody would care, and he should be thankful that they were decent, Christian men. All he would lose, Quentin heard, was the little dab of money that he'd begun with. His immorally won pot had never belonged to him. This experience would teach him a new respect for rules and fair play. "Cheat again," said the man, "and you'd better do a better job of it. At least don't be so goddamn greedy the next time."

Except he hadn't cheated, he thought. And he tried to defend himself, asking his kidnappers, "Haven't you ever heard of luck?"

His luck, they maintained, had been unnaturally large.

"I played fair and square," Quentin persisted. Yet suddenly, thinking back on the evening, he felt less than certain. It had seemed awfully easy, hadn't it? Easy, and strange too. In ways he couldn't decipher.

The wagon halted. Quentin was unloaded and untied, and the men even returned the old revolver and belt that he'd left at the bar. His horse gave the ground some stomps, then it snorted. Then the lecturing man said, "One more word of advice, boy. Stay out of our city."

Quentin breathed and straightened up, then found his voice, telling them, "What's it matter? You're rich. It wasn't even that much money, so far as you're concerned."

To which the second man—a banker who smelled of cigars and perfumed soaps—said, "Do you think this is about money? It's not. Believe it or not, there are a lot of things more important than money, son."

Except when you're broke, he thought. He asked them, "Are you leaving me with nothing? Because if you are, you're stealing from me. And that makes you thieves!"

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The logic meant something to the banker. He nodded, almost smiling, then said, "You like gold? Here's gold." He threw Quentin a tiny coin worn smooth by years of trading hands, warm from the pocket and pleasantly heavy despite the wear. "It's almost what you started with, so don't complain." A deep pause, then he said, "Leave. Go. You'll have to find your fortune somewhere else, son."

It was ranch country, sandhills covered with grass and nothing for miles but barbed wire and the little fenceposts that held it up. Quentin slept that night under the stars, dreaming of that strange golden plain; and come morning, he ate jerky and saddled his horse, considering the possible directions that he might ride. The road itself split in two, the used fork heading off to the west. But for some reason, he rode north, following the ruts of past wagons, the grass dotted with scrawny cattle and giving way to sandy blowouts on the tops of the hills.

It was a hot day, the countryside burned and dead from the summer-long drought. A lone windmill gave both him and his horse water and a splash of shade, then they continued, the road splitting once more and Quentin keeping north. He quit wondering why. The heat numbed him, making most thinking impossible. The last of his jerky made his belly sour, and the wind blew hard in the afternoon, grains of sand lifted high and stinging him from behind.

Once, pausing on the crest of a long hill, he thought he saw something peculiar. There was a silvery something in the distance, more round than anything. It floated like a balloon, never making a sound. But when he pulled his hat forward and squinted—in that instant—the object dropped behind the next hill or evaporated clean away. It wasn't real, he decided. It had been some kind of mirage. And with that he rode on, following the tiny road, wondering where he would go when it vanished entirely.

He didn't need to worry. The road came to a farmstead and a little prairie lake set in a long valley, some farmer having plowed himself a couple of fields at one time. It was earliest evening, the heat unabated. For a long moment, Quentin believed that the place was abandoned. The fields were choked with sun-browned weeds and wild corn. There was a feel of neglect about the house and barn. But then he saw the horses in the corral, alive enough to run back and forth; and he saw a sudden flash of light from the far hillside. Someone was up there, he realized. He stopped and squinted, just able to make out a man-shape standing on a big lump of earth, and he found himself thinking:

This is where you want to be.

Or someone was thinking it. For the first time, Quentin wondered if someone else could be feeding him these ideas, making sure that he came to this place. Which was a crazy notion, he knew. Absolutely crazy. And now, riding closer to the farmhouse, he came near the edge of one weedy field and saw a man walking toward him. The fellow seemed unnaturally familiar—tall and bearded, strongly built and possessing wild eyes—and

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he was close enough to touch Quentin, smiling at him, holding a repeating rifle in both hands.

There was no warning.

The man kept smiling, taking his rifle by its barrel and never saying a word. He swung hard as Quentin started to say, "Good evening," and he was knocked from his saddle with the first blow, falling on his side and his horse spooking and that familiar wild-eyed man hitting two more times, turning him off like one of Edison's miracle lights.

A girl woke him. Quentin jerked when she touched his forehead with a wet rag, and she said, "Keep still," with a motherly authority. She was sixteen, he guessed. She looked something like the man with the rifle, only pretty and a lot less hairy, and she had a pretty and very soft little voice. "Just keep still," she told him, as if he could have moved. Quentin discovered that his arms and legs were tied to an old bed. He had blotchy memories of being carried, of someone taking his gun and boots. He'd passed in and out of consciousness all night. Where was he? Inside some shack, he realized. Its door was open, and through it he could see the scorching blue sky and one of the weedy fields.

The girl rose and moved away, wringing the rag dry over a wooden pail; then she told him, "Stay put," as if he could have untied himself. She folded the rag and took it and the pail, leaving him, and maybe he passed out again or maybe he slept. Either way, a big man with a big unkempt beard woke him the next time. This was the man who had struck him, eyes smiling now, him giving Quentin a couple quick slaps on the cheeks.

"What are you doing here, boy?"

Quentin said nothing, trying to decide for himself.

Then the man slapped him, once and hard, and the shack was spinning, Quentin clinging to the bed, groaning while the voice asked:

"What's your name?"

He couldn't remember. He had to search through his clotted head, finally saying, "Quentin."

The man grinned, saying, "I'm Buckner." He breathed a couple times, then said, "Sorry for the headache. I thought you were going to try fighting me." Buckner glanced over a shoulder. The girl had appeared again, standing in the open doorway with her hands folded in front of her. "They're on the wall, around back," he told her. She made a sound before turning and walking out of view. Then Buckner leaned close, his breath bad and his beard full of dried tobacco juice, fat veins showing in his nose. "My girl's going to be your nursemaid, okay? I'm letting you up to move around. But not far. Hear me? Try running, and I will kill you."

Quentin nodded, saying nothing.

"I caught you trespassing," Buckner explained, "and I can do what I want. I'll tell any story I want, if someone asks. But looking at you, I'm guessing nobody's going to ask. Nobody cares."

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This was a dream, a nightmare. . . .

There was a jingling outside. The girl walked in, carrying leg irons, grimacing with their weight. Buckner took them and locked them around Quentin's bare ankles, then he cut the rope bindings. "Take him to the house," he said, "and feed him."

"Yes, Pa."

There was something in her voice. The man heard it and turned, then asked, "What's the matter?"

She gave Quentin a quick glance, then shrank down. "Nothing."

"Nothing is right." He shook his head and stepped back, saying, "You tell me. Think he's anyone? To me, he looks like wolves raised him. I'm guessing he's some kind of criminal on the run."

She kept her face down, saying nothing.

"So why do we do this, girl?"

She swallowed, then said, "For the family—"

"Right!"

The girl gave a half-nod.

Buckner looked at Quentin, bright eyes shining about the yellow smile. "He's just what we need. A godsend, coming here like this. Don't you think so?"

"Yes, Pa."

"You tell me how he's helping us. Go on."

"He's helping . . . helping us get what we're owed. . . ."

"Right!"

". . . because of our charity," she finished, her voice steady and practiced and dead. "*They* owe us."

"And remember that." Buckner stepped to the door, saying, "Make sure he eats plenty. Keeping him strong is your job."

"Yes, Pa." She swallowed and said, "I'm just afraid—"

"You worry too much. Haven't I told you already?" He winked at Quentin, saying, "We'll take good care of this one."

This one?

"He's young enough. He looks sort of tough." A big laugh. "He'll come through just fine. Keep him clean and fed, and he'll do all right."

His daughter shrank some more.

"And what if he doesn't?" Buckner added. "Whose fault is that? Not yours, and sure as hell not mine. It's *their* fault. If they cooperated, like they promised, would we have to do this?"

"No?"

"So it's their blame to wear, and remember that! Say it over and over, if you need to. But don't you forget!"

The house was small and ugly, built from sod with too much sand among the roots and crumbling in the heat and drought. Nobody had bothered to make repairs. It wasn't too far from the shack, but Quentin's leg irons made it feel like miles. He arrived panting, the ground rolling under him. The girl told him to sit outside and wait, and he sat, head in

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hands. She went inside. After a minute, feeling steadier, he looked up and studied his surroundings. The fields hadn't been planted this year. The lake beyond was shallow and round, cattails at its edges and little waves forming under the wind. The barn had been built from cheap lumber, and already it was slumping in its middle. Its corral had three horses now, including his, and his horse was the strongest, healthiest of the three. Which was saying something. . . .

The girl returned, giving him a bowl of cold hash and some fresh water, and he made a point of asking her name when their eyes met. She dipped her head, saying nothing. Then he said, "What? Can't you tell me your name?"

"Gertrude," she whispered.

"What happened to your corn, Gertrude?"

She walked to the other side of the open door, saying, "We don't have any this year."

"No kidding!"

She opened her mouth, then thought again and closed it, leaning against the sod wall.

His legs irons were cutting off his blood, and Quentin had to wiggle his toes to keep them from tingling. But his appetite was fine. He used a bent fork and his fingers, drinking water between every couple of mouthfuls, and it was as if he hadn't eaten in days. The hash wasn't good, but it was fuel. It helped clear his head, which made him think of more questions. "So, Gertrude. Who is *they?*"

She stared out at the lake. He saw her profile and how her dark hair was tied into a bun; and again she opened her mouth and didn't speak, no words to offer and the eyes glancing at him for an instant.

"Whose fault will it be?" he persisted. "If it's their fault, who's *they?*"

She answered a different question. "There wasn't any point in planting," she half-whispered. "Pa decided, this spring—"

"Why?"

She wouldn't say why.

"Why'd you come here? You're farmers, aren't you?"

"Sure." She gave him a look, as if to say, "Of course we are!"

"But why'd you come here?"

"Our old farm played out," she reported.

Quentin ran his fingers through the sandy soil. "Can you grow corn in this stuff?"

"Sometimes."

"No you can't," he responded. "This is cattle country. There's not enough rain for anything but grass."

"We did all right," Gertrude claimed, irritated by his words. "That first year, we did real well."

"You were lucky," he offered.

And she snapped, "This is the only land left. Where else can you homestead anymore?"

Quentin laughed quietly. Maybe he was a prisoner, and maybe he

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was scared of what might happen. But at least he could enjoy the girl's ignorance, her willingness to believe what she wanted to believe. He kept laughing until she said, "Are you done?"

He put down the empty bowl and took another drink.

Gertrude picked up the bowl and fork and disappeared inside, and Quentin stood and held himself steady with one arm, looking in after her, eyes struggling with the shadows. He could see a pair of beds, bodies lying motionless on them. Were they dead? Then he realized, no, they were sleeping. And he could see enough of one face to know it was a brother, several years older and sporting a thinner version of his father's beard.

"You've got to go back," she told him, stepping around him. "Come on, or I'll get them to help me."

"You've got a lazy family," he offered. "Sleeping this late."

She stopped, not turning to look at him. Then she started walking again, telling him, "They were up all night."

"Why?"

She paused again. "Are you coming?" She didn't want to look at him, her eyes forward. "Because I could get Pa, if you don't. And you don't want that."

He started shuffling, the leg irons bouncing and clanking. He thought about escaping, picturing himself getting away from her and climbing onto his tired old horse. And what? How could he ride with leg irons? What chance did he have without a gun? Then he remembered the gold coin that the banker had given him, and he reached into his pockets, finding nothing but lint and warmth. Buckner had stolen the coin, he was sure.

"Get inside," said Gertrude.

Then she added, "Please."

Where could he go? Nowhere. Quentin moved into the shack, sitting on the bed, sunlight falling over his bare feet. "You haven't told me," he muttered. "Who's this *they* you talk about?"

"You'll see," she promised.

"And if you're not farming, why do you stay here?"

She kept silent.

He looked at his feet, noticing something odd. Inside the leg irons, inside their clamps, was a bright purple paint. Except it was exactly where ankles would wear raw if you let them, if the irons didn't fit right. He asked her, "Who wore these last, Gertrude?"

She stepped into the doorway, partly blocking the light. "There was a man before you," she said, her voice falling away to nothing.

"What man?"

"Nobody." She sighed. "Never mind."

"What's this purple stuff?"

"Gertie," she said.

He looked up, blinking at sunshine. "What?"

"I don't like being called Gertrude." She took a breath and let it out

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slowly, then told him, "Before that man, the toad wore them. That's where the purple came from."

"The what?"

"The purple. It's blood—"

"No, the toad . . . what toad?"

She was closing the door, her soft voice saying, "You'll see." Then it was dark except for the gaps in the walls and around the door, and maybe she was saying, "You'll see," once again. She was talking. He couldn't hear the words, but the residue of their sound seeped inside with those little spears of slanting light.

She locked the door with a heavy wooden bar, and Quentin rose and shuffled around the place. Besides the bed, there was no furniture. The floor was more sand than dirt. Pegs on the walls meant this was a storage shed, but it had been stripped bare. He tried for a little while to work one of the boards free; but nothing gave and there wasn't any point anyway. What could he do? He ended up looking out through the gaps as best he could, and he noticed the earthen lump on the far hillside, someone walking on top of it. Back and forth, back and forth. Like a guard, he realized; and the sun caught on a rifle barrel, sending a sparkle of light down at him.

That lump was a root cellar or an old dugout. Sometimes people in this country built dugouts instead of sod houses, since they were easier and quicker. They were nice, except for being dark and damp and there being the chance that your milk cow would break through your roof. So why put a guard on top of an old dugout? he wondered. What was inside it? And what, if anything, did this have to do with any damned old toad?

Come evening, Quentin saw two figures climbing the hill, both of them armed, carrying rifles at the ready. Those were the sleeping brothers, he realized; and now a second guard emerged from the dugout, one of the new boys going inside and closing the door after him. Then it was too dark to see, and Quentin lay down on the bed, on his back, trying to sleep despite feeling thirsty and hot, the damned leg irons making his toes go numb. He was still awake when Buckner arrived. The bar came off the door, and the loud voice said, "Hello, boy. Up, up. Time to earn your keep!"

The man was cheerful in a wicked, poisoned way.

They climbed the long hill together, and Buckner wasn't particularly patient, growling when he stumbled, standing over him and asking, "Are you ready for some fun?"

"What's going to happen?" Quentin whispered.

"Nothing you've ever dreamed of," he replied. Smiling, but not smiling. "Now get up. Up! Up and move!"

Maybe the dugout had been someone's home. But its door wasn't any normal door, double-thick and bolstered with metal, a pair of giant locks and a well-anchored jamb. Buckner kicked the door with his boot heel,

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shouting, "We're coming in, John!" The outside guard looked down at them; he was younger than Gertie, maybe a couple of years younger. "Anything to see?" snapped Buckner.

"No, sir," the boy replied.

"How would you know? You're staring at us!"

"Sorry . . . sir." He turned and made a show of gazing off into the sky, his big rifle held in both hands.

Buckner gave a little laugh, working on the locks with big iron keys. "Best eyes in the family," he whispered. Then, talking louder, he said, "Here. Help me push."

Quentin did what he was told. There was a pistol on Buckner's belt, but the man looked quick and alert and he didn't dare try anything. For all he knew, it was a test. A trap. He halfway pushed, and the door opened inward, a vivid thick dampness striking him in the face. With that dampness was the sweet stink of something rotting, like a sack of forgotten apples. The fumes made him ill. He coughed, and Buckner said, "Get on in there!" He stepped and halfway stumbled, and Buckner laughed, shoving him with his boot and Quentin toppling forward, onto the earthen floor, then laid there still and quiet. Collecting his wits.

Someone said, "Scrawny."

Buckner said, "He's been eating your sister's food."

Both men laughed, louder than seemed natural. Then Buckner said, "In a little while, it's no more hash. Never again."

"Never again," the brother echoed.

Then they turned silent, watchful. And something began to move in front of Quentin, very close. He heard a slow breath and a sigh and then the cool rattling of someone else's chains.

The only light in the dugout came from a kerosene lamp. The door was shut again, locked again, and the older brother, John, stood next to his father. Quentin blinked and climbed to his feet, taking in his surroundings. There was a simple table and chair in one corner. The earthen walls and ceiling were held in place with planks of old wood. A cowbell hung on a cord strung through an airhole. Some kind of alarm? In the middle of the dugout was a solid post that helped with the ceiling, and beside that post was a stack of trash. Someone had thrown a quilt over the trash, but he could smell the stink coming from underneath. And then the quilt started to move, falling away, an arm suddenly visible and then another arm, tremendously long fingers curling and the chains locked around the thick wrists. It was some kind of animal. Quentin blinked and stepped back, thinking how it sort of looked like a toad. Its skin was thick and rough and almost colorless, and those eyes could have belonged to a giant toad. Only they were put forward on a face that was more like a monkey's. Sort of. And he could see how someone had put trousers on the monkey, tight and slick trousers. Which seemed funny, sort of. This was some kind of ugly little ape, he was thinking; then its mouth came

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open and with an odd voice, rough and slow, the creature told him, "Sorry . . . sorry . . . for you sorry. . . ."

Quentin began to shake, feeling a chill.

"Take off your shirt," Buckner told him.

He didn't. He stood motionless, numbed but not exactly scared, and Buckner reached around him and popped every button, trying to pull it off of him. Then Quentin started to squirm, swinging an elbow, and John smacked him with a shotgun butt. Not hard. He went down on his knees, more startled than hurt. Someone gave a soft groan. Then Buckner was grabbing at him, dragging him over to the creature, the toad . . . everything happening slow and dreamlike strange . . . and he shoved Quentin against it, its flesh cool and not as rough as it looked. Soft like fat, and weak.

"The belt," said Buckner.

John handed him a rawhide belt, wide and smelling of mold and sweat, and Buckner wrapped it around both of their heads, the toad and Quentin sitting ear-to-ear. Their faces were pointed in the same direction, and he could smell the animal's sickly breathing, its whispering voice saying, "Sorry," once again.

John took a coiled-up something off of a peg. It was a whip, Quentin realized, and he cracked it once, as if making sure that it worked. They were planning to beat the animal, of course. Quentin couldn't think of any other explanation. Because they had no reason to beat him—

—and the first blow caused him to jerk and scream, pressing against the cool body beside him. A second blow, and he twisted, trying to escape. Two more tries went wide, and Buckner said, "Here, give it!"

"I can manage, Pa."

"Give it!"

The man-sized boy handed the whip to his father. The toad was shivering now, letting out a low sound that meant pain. Somehow Quentin knew it was suffering just like he was suffering, maybe worse. Which made sense, somehow. Then Buckner caught him with the whip, tearing at Quentin's back, and both of them groaned and shook while twisting their heads, the rawhide belt squeaking and Buckner hitting him again, and again. Then he shouted, "I'm tired of waiting! It's taking too damned long!"

The beating was done. Someone removed the belt, Quentin slumping to the floor and trying not to move.

"Soon soon," the toad was saying. "Soon we bring. . . !"

"You always say that! Always!"

Sand was working its way into Quentin's wounds, grinding at him like tiny teeth.

"Give me a time, a date. When does it get here?"

"A season," replied the toad. "Two, maybe three."

"That's no date. And it's sure as hell not soon." Buckner came closer, telling it, "Soon means tomorrow. Next week. Not in months, goddamn it!"

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"Difficult work," the creature muttered. "Estimates . . . past . . . too hopeful. . . ."

"Shut up!" Buckner let the damp tip of the whip dangle in Quentin's eyes. "See him? Look at him." A pause. "Know what this boy means? He means that I'm tired of waiting. Just like last time, it's going to be nightly reminders. Except this fellow's a good deal tougher, so don't start hoping that he'll die beside you." Another pause, then he said, "Maybe promises don't mean much to you, but I'm holding you and yours to what you promised us!"

"Troubles," the toad replied. "Finding . . . working . . . very sorry for delays. . . !"

Someone put a boot into Quentin's back, and the toad flinched with him, its legs kicking reflexively. The quilt was off of it now, and Quentin's eyes tracked downward, something wrong and noticeable but his eyes taking forever to focus. What was he seeing? Where there should have been feet and ankles, there was nothing. The feet had been hacked off, the wounds rough and not healed, oozing something that wasn't quite blood, dark enough to be purple and making that sickly rotting stink.

Buckner stood over Quentin, smiling in that way of his. "Time for bed," he said. "For both of you."

Quentin stared at the toad, and it met his gaze; and for an instant, it was as if he could think its thoughts for it, and it for him, both of them sharing pain and sorrow and a deep loneliness that stole away their breath and their will, leaving them wanting to die.

"We call it Toad," said Gertie. "With a big T."

Quentin was eating breakfast. More of the salty hash was mixed with bits of boiled meat. It was work to eat, his appetite ruined and his wounds aching, his entire body exhausted from a night of awful dreams and endless fear. He'd expected Buckner to return and beat him again. Every little sound was the bearded man arriving at the shack's door, which was nearly as bad as a beating. That's what he was thinking now.

He rubbed his feet and tried to listen, and Gertie was saying, "They come from another planet. From a long ways away."

"Mars?" He'd heard that Mars had its own people.

"No, from farther. Some planet we can't even see." She was sitting in the shack's doorway, looking outside and then back in at him. "I'm sorry. This is pretty awful, I know, and I'm sorry."

She sounded a little like the Toad.

"Where'd you get it, Gertie?"

"Pa and John found it. Last March." She moved as if she wasn't comfortable, then settled into the same place. "It was west of here. They found a little ship crashed in the grass, and five or six Toads. One of them was alive. It tried running, and Pa roped it and brought it back. We put it in the dugout. We didn't know what it was. Probably some kind of chimp, we guessed. Mama fed it potatoes and turnips, and sometimes it'll eat dead bugs. And Pa talked about selling it to a carnival. Carnivals like freaks, he'd say."

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Why did this story sound familiar? It was as if he'd dreamt it once and hadn't quite forgotten it.

"The Toad listened to him. To everyone. To words, and sometimes to what we were thinking." She swallowed and gave a little nod. "Mama was in charge of cleaning up after it. She was shoveling up its turds, and all of a sudden it grabbed her, got her face, and pulled her down to touch its face." She glanced at him, then said, "You know what I mean."

"What happened?"

"It talked. All at once, it was telling her everything about everything." She sighed and wiped the sweat off of her forehead, using the back of one hand. "It was lonely, like we can't imagine. And she learned that it came from space and that it's a she, sort of, and she's got sisters just the same as her—"

"Yeah?"

"Like twin sisters, only there's hundreds of them."

Quentin moved his fork from hand to hand, not eating, staring at his fingers while he tried to think.

"Toads are strange," Gertie was saying. "Like, for instance, they're all tied together. When they're close, they know everything each other thinks and feels. Particularly when they're sisters. It's like they've got one big shared brain. There's nothing like privacy. Even at a huge distance, they can concentrate hard and make connections. For a few minutes. Which is what our Toad did, calling out for help."

"Yeah?"

"They're strange, Mama told us. And we're just as strange to them, too."

Quentin picked up a piece of boiled meat, placing it on his tongue. He didn't ask about her mother, wanting to wait. Instead he asked, "How did those Toads get here?"

She said, "In a huge ship, a whole big family of sisters coming here together. Exploring as they went."

He knew about that ship. How did he know it?

"Their little ship, the one that crashed . . . it was the first one to make it to Earth. They knew there was life here. They could see it in our air, whatever that means. Only they didn't know about us. Smart life was a big surprise, and the crash was an accident, a bunch of things going wrong at once."

He nodded, knowing how it could happen. Bad luck can run as thick as the good stuff.

"Pa told Mama to keep talking with it, and she'd tell him everything. Everything." Gertie took a breath and said, "Finally some little ships came here to get their sister . . . this was April . . . and Pa was ready for them. He went up to the dugout with my brothers. I watched from down here, with Mama. One of the ships landed, and its Toads climbed out. Their world is smaller than ours, and walking is hard work. They got only partway to the dugout when Pa stepped in front of them, not letting them pass."

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"They don't have weapons." He didn't say it as a question, but instead as something he knew by instinct. And she said:

"They don't have wars, or enemies, or anything like that. Mama says that's because they're so tied together."

"And they can't lie either," he whispered. "How could they cheat or steal? They're always reading each other's minds."

"And some people's too. Sort of."

"Like your mother's."

"But not Pa's. I don't think they can read him at all."

He watched her for a moment, then asked, "What happened next?"

"Pa wouldn't let them get past, and he stuck his rifle at them. He asked if they could understand him, and they said, 'Yes,' in one voice. So he told them that people have rules. Important rules. People have something called property, which he knew they didn't understand, and trespassing on someone's property is a very bad thing. The owner, by rights, can deal with trespassers any way he sees fit, including killing him. Then he told them that he could have killed their sister straight out. Could have and didn't."

Quentin felt sick to his stomach.

Gertie read his face, then told him, "He won't. It's just that we're poor, see? And the Toads are rich, with their fancy ships and everything. They live almost forever, did I tell you? A century to them is like a year to us. That one you saw is enormously old—"

"He wants to be paid, doesn't he?"

She gave him a hard nod, starting to cry now. "We're poor. All our lives, we've been stuck on bad land, fighting for everything."

"He told them to pay, right?"

She pulled her hands across her face, crying harder. Years of dammed up frustration showed themselves, and Quentin was sorry for her and angry with her. Her father was a son-of-a-bitch, which wasn't her fault. But she didn't have to sit there and defend him. Not to me, he thought. Not even before my whip marks can heal up. . . !

Gertie whispered something under her breath.

"What? What was that?"

She said, "Gold," and sat straighter. "We're going to be paid in gold. It's Pa's idea. They'll bring it to us."

Now Quentin thought back on the poker game, remembering how he had laid those gold coins together . . . and he asked, "Where do they get it? And how much does he want?"

"There's these little worlds out past Mars." She looked at the sky as if she could see them. "Our Toad told Mama about them, how her big ship was mining one of them for all kinds of important metals."

"Yeah?"

She gazed over at the lake, eyes narrowing. "Pa wants enough gold to fill the lake. That's what he told them. 'Fair is fair,' he told them. 'I didn't invite you to visit, and you're trespassing, and that's what I want for my time and trouble.' "

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Quentin could hear Buckner saying it. He shut his eyes and felt as if he had been standing with the Toads.

"Pa gave a shout," she said, "and John started to beat our Toad."

He remembered, yes. All of it—

"And Pa shot holes in the ground too. Except the beating was the worst part of it. Pa knew it would be. The Toads felt every hit, and they climbed back into their ships and flew away. Then he came down and told us what had happened. He said, 'It's funny. John would pop it with the whip, and I'd see all of them shaking. Like they're all leaves on the same tree branch, you know?' "

"He said that?"

"And afterward, he had Mama repeat everything to our Toad. Just to make sure *they* understood. And it said that the gold would be here soon. Its word. 'Soon.' "

"That must have made your mother happy."

Gertie looked back at the lake again, then shrugged her shoulders. "It did," she lied. "It did."

He knew she was lying, reading it in her face. In the soft, false little voice.

"If they can fly between stars," Quentin said, "why can't they break their sister out of a hole in the ground?"

She dropped her eyes, saying nothing.

"Have they tried rescuing her? They have, haven't they?"

"Pa's done everything he can to keep them away. And my brothers are always on guard. We didn't plant crops, because we didn't have time—"

"Her sisters came again, didn't they? Gertie?"

"They watch us. Some nights, we can see two or three of their ships floating against the stars, doing nothing."

Quentin remembered the odd balloon that he'd seen in the sky. Had they been watching him?

"A couple of months ago," she said, "it got free of the leg irons somehow and tried to run. My brothers were changing guard, and it slipped outside while the door was open. The ships were already coming. They had these long cords for catching it, only John caught it first. Wrestled it down and hit it until he drove the others away, and Pa came running up. . . ."

Her voice trailed off, and he asked, "What happened?"

"Pa gets angry. He gets . . . anyway, he took an axe to its legs." She blinked and glanced at Quentin. "Did you see its legs?"

"Yeah."

"How do they look?"

He tried to describe them; and she said:

"My brothers were afraid it would die from all the bleeding. But I guess you don't live a thousand years unless you're tough."

"Why did he cut them off?"

"He was angry," she whined. Then she added, "To teach its sisters a lesson too. And to keep it from running away again."

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He watched her.

She swallowed and told him, "Pa decided who had let the Toad get free. It was my little brother's fault, and Pa gave him a whipping for being careless—"

"I bet."

"—and that's where we learned something else about Toads. That business of them feeling our pain. Ours had just lost both its feet, which had to hurt, but what hurt worse was being near my brother's whipping. The closer they were together, the worse it felt."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

But he had an idea. Pain was bright and powerful, flowing into them a lot easier than words. And human pain was a different color than their own, a different shape . . . something they couldn't block, couldn't protect themselves from. He said, "There was someone before me, wasn't there? You used him the same as me, and you killed him—"

"I haven't killed anyone!" She shivered and almost looked at him, then turned away and said, "He was a criminal besides. He was trying to steal one of our horses when Pa caught him."

"So?"

"And sort of old too. Nobody meant to kill him."

"I'm not a criminal, Gertie."

She breathed and said, "I shouldn't be talking to you."

"Even if I was a criminal, would this be all right?"

"You're doing fine," she replied, sounding halfway certain. She rose and stepped outside, grabbing the shack's door while assuring him, "He's being careful with you. He's promised me."

"Gertie?"

She started tugging on the door, trying to close it but her strength failing her.

"This isn't right," he said.

"I can't help you," she whispered. Then she breathed and summoned a smile, almost real, saying in a too-loud voice, "We'll all be rich in a little while. Rich and happy."

"Who's *we*?"

"I'll give you part of my share. I promise."

"But I don't want it."

She swallowed and told him, "You're stupid. Do you know how much gold we're talking about? You don't, do you?"

He remembered the rich banker giving him that gold coin, claiming that there were things more valuable than money. And it was true. Even for a poor man—particularly for a poor man—there were treasures like life and love and pride, and freedom too.

He said, "This is all wrong, Gertie."

Something came into her eyes. "All my life," she said, "I've dreamed of being rich. Of being someone." The words sounded tired and practiced, and they were gone as soon as they were spoken.

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"Shut the door," he told her. "Go on."

She pushed it shut and gave a low moan; then the board fell into place and she left, her shadow sweeping along, showing in the tiny slots and the knotholes.

Buckner came again, just like the night before. He stood over him and told him to leave the shirt, he wouldn't need it, and he made him walk up the long hill again. He and John used the same rawhide belt and the whip—the Toad jerking as much as Quentin and both of them screaming. Buckner had the whip, and he stopped to ask the Toad, "What's your scheme? I know you're working on one. What is it?"

"No no no *no*," said the alien voice. "No scheme no no. . . !"

Someone doused them with water. Quentin jerked and accidentally touched one of the bloody stumps with his hand, feeling the cut bone and meat, then smelling it on his sticky fingers. He hated that stink and his pain, his captors, and the goddamn Toad too. He hated the Toad's bad luck for crashing here and its ignorance with people . . . stupid, stupid creatures . . . then Buckner was working again, slicing open last night's wounds while explaining that he was more than fair, more than reasonable, asking for nothing but straight and honest answers.

Then his voice fell away, replaced with a velvety hum.

A sudden voice emerged from the hum. The Toad was speaking to him, mind-to-mind, in pictures and words and concepts neatly absorbed. She was saying that Quentin was blameless for everything. Blame among Toads, she said, was something shared by each family, equally by every sister . . . but humans were peculiar creatures, each set into some hierarchy with leaders and followers. Leaders wore the blame. The Toads still were wrestling with the rules, the subtleties. "We are one small scattered family," said the mouthless voice, "and please, please be patient with stupid us."

The whip hit him again, breaking the link with searing pain.

Quentin found his eyes wide open, the humming gone; and with a shrill, scared voice, he cried, "Get out of my head!"

Buckner coiled the whip and smiled, studying both of them for a moment. Then he announced, "No more tonight."

John threw another pail of water over them, then unfastened the belt and let Quentin fall aside. He gasped, lying there for an age. For a few seconds. He wasn't sure how long. Then the heavy door was pulled open, night air tasting cool, and Buckner jerked him to his feet and made him shuffle outside. The Toad moved, chains ringing; Quentin tried to look back and was slugged. Once, not hard. Then he was breathing fresh air, and Buckner wanted to know, "What did it say to you?"

"Nothing."

"It told you something. I know."

Quentin said, "No." He wanted to be strong, at least once. He promised himself not to give anything away.

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But the man made a show of laughing, enjoying his stubbornness. "So do you see why I'm doing this shit to you?"

"To make *them* hurt," he whispered.

"And keep them at a distance, sure. But why else?"

Quentin was silent.

"Because," said the smiling man. "Because sometimes things seep out while they're hurting. While ours is hurting." He paused, then said, "Tell what you know, and I'll lighten up on you."

"No."

"Work with me. How about it?"

Quentin stumbled, dropping face-first into the grass and staying down, eyes closed, wishing he could be anywhere else.

"What's their plan?" Buckner was asking. "Because I know they've got one. That fellow before you . . . he said that the Toads had some sort of scheme—"

"No."

"—and they weren't bringing us any gold. That they'd lied to me. They're delaying, trying to find some way to get their little sister free. Can you believe that?"

He tried to stand, arms pushing and nothing accomplished.

"Did it show you where its sisters are hiding? I know they're close, I can taste them." A pause. "What did the Toad tell you?"

"Put your head next to it," Quentin muttered. "You ask it."

Buckner knelt and laughed, picking up a handful of sand and carefully dropping it into the wounds on Quentin's back. Then he was saying, "They can't be fools. Not completely, at least. So if I keep working on them, through you, what can they do? They'll have to give me what I want."

Quentin stared at the face, the smile. "It did tell me something."

"Yeah? What?"

"That you're to blame." He moved again, managing to stand. "*They* hold you responsible for everything."

"True enough." Another laugh, happy and loud. "And now don't you forget it, boy! Not ever."

Breakfast was late. Gertie left it on the floor next to the bed, then took his chamber pot and left the shack's door standing open. Quentin woke and sat up, not even tempted to run now. It was all he could manage to eat, having no hunger. Food was medicine, and twice it nearly made him vomit, him clamping his hands over his mouth and the urge passing. Then he laid on his belly and fell asleep, oblivious to Gertie's return, her standing over him, watching him, then kneeling to take back the bowl and fork.

She fed him a second time, in the afternoon, then cleaned his wounds with rags and strong soap. There seemed to be an agreement between them; they didn't mention Toads or her father. Instead he asked about her first farm, the one back East, and she described it and tried to tell

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some stories. Funny stories, except they came out flat and humorless. Then she asked about him, what about his family? He didn't have one, at least not anymore. He'd been orphaned when he was little, living with an uncle and his family. Not bad people, but not his people either. He'd left them when he was fifteen or so. He told her about the places he had seen and his jobs. A lot of the time he was bored, but suddenly boredom seemed precious. He came close to crying, just for a moment; then Gertie made a little sound, and Quentin realized that someone else was with them. He stopped talking and saw a shadow on the wall. Then Buckner said:

"Don't bother with that, he's fine."

Gertie breathed and said nothing.

"Don't you have chores, darling?"

"Sure, Pa."

"And I want to eat. Sooner the better."

"Yes, Pa."

The shadow left. Both of them breathed, then Quentin asked, "Can't your mother feed him?"

Gertie froze for an instant. Then, as if she hadn't heard him, she began gathering up her belongings; and he asked, "Have you ever talked to the Toad?"

She said, "No."

He listened to the word and her breathing, feeling a palpable tension; then he asked, "Why not?""

"Pa won't let me. I'm not allowed in the dugout."

"Why not?"

She said nothing.

Quentin rolled onto his side, looking at her face. "Does your mama still feed it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

She swallowed and said, "She's dead."

He knew that. Somehow he'd known it from the first, and he was ready with his next question. "How did she die, Gertie?"

"Drowned . . . in the lake, she was bathing—"

"When?"

"I guess . . . a couple months ago."

"After your pa cut off the Toad's feet, right? Is that right?"

The question seemed too complicated, the girl's features pinching and her hands holding each other and the soft voice telling him, "Mama always was sickly. Weak, you know? Pa says that talking to the Toad made her worse, a little crazy . . . she forgot she couldn't swim and got too deep in the water. . . ."

"You think the Toad made her kill herself?"

She blinked as if shocked, going pale through the face.

"What do you think happened, Gertie?"

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She didn't know. She said that much with her face, sighing and starting to pick up her belongings; and while she was leaving, off to get her father's supper, Quentin assured her, "It wasn't the Toad's fault. Whatever happened, you can't blame her."

It was just the third night, but it felt like the ninety-third. Quentin carried his chain to keep it out of the grass, but he was tired and clumsy, the ground seemingly sucking the life from his legs. He fell, got up. Fell, got up. Then fell and stayed down, breathing in gulps, and Buckner prodded him with a boot toe, saying, "We'll do it a little different tonight. Don't worry."

Except it started the same. He was strapped to the Toad, him knowing how she would feel down to the rubbery lumps and her coolness; and again Buckner beat him, them, quitting a little early this time and kneeling before them. He could see both of their faces, and he asked, "Where's my gold?"

The creature moaned and said nothing.

"Show your friend. Right now, show him!"

Quentin could feel the Toad's eyes closing, its breath coming faster now. Then his eyes fell shut, and he was floating, dim distant connections being made, then enhanced, a tingling sensation making him shiver and stars appearing in the darkness. The starlight was steady and too bright. *I've been here,* he was thinking. *I know this place.* There was no ground, no sense of up-and-down, just space and silence and a cold that Quentin couldn't feel but that was there nonetheless. The sun was on his right, too small by half. One of his thick arms lifted, and he saw that he was wearing some fancy suit of armor. And his body was wrong. Changed. And it wouldn't move like he wanted; it didn't belong to him. He was some other Toad drifting in space, its mind focusing on its dear unfortunate sister . . . millions of miles between them, and nothing at all. . . .

He saw the floating mountain, not round and not sharp. It was covered with pits and hills and cracks, and the Toads' starship was the giant lamp that he'd seen before, lumpy and shiny and glowing from deep within. He could picture its hallways and communal rooms, giant engines and talking machines. *Home,* he felt. *My home.* Then came a flash, brilliant and sudden. Gold was being split from lesser metals. The starship stood in the largest pit, in a lake of liquid gold, suited figures working steadily, patiently making ready. . . .

Quentin thought of those engines, their power and heat, and how they could turn them on Buckner and his valley, leaving the place barren, glass and ash for miles around—

—and the Toad broke the connection, groaning and twisting its head, eyes open again. "No no no," it warned him. "To kill . . . *no no* . . . cannot never never. . . !"

Buckner was smiling, eager. "You see it? Yeah?"

Quentin was surprised to find himself on Earth again. That other place had felt absolutely real to him.

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"You saw the gold?!"

He described what he had seen, trying for accuracy.

"They're not done smelting? How much longer now?" Greed gave the face an eerie life. "How soon?"

Both the Toad and Quentin said, "Winter." It felt like an honest answer, allowing for distance and the mass. But Buckner refused to believe them, jumping to his feet and shouting:

"And how am I supposed to live that long? No crops, no money! You bastards! You're trying to starve us out, aren't you?"

Quentin didn't know what the Toads intended. They hadn't lied to him, but they hadn't shown him everything either.

Suddenly Buckner kicked him in the chest, without warning.

Quentin gasped and fell backward, the rawhide belt popping loose. Then Buckner was over him, kicking him in the ribs and stomping on his belly. Quentin's guts wanted to burst. His ribs ached. He was past pain, almost unconscious . . . and now the Toad was beside him, her smell thick and reassuring. She put herself between Buckner and him, taking the blows while the crazed man screamed:

"You're cheating me, goddamn you! You're cheating me!"

His son grabbed him, dragging him back and saying, "Don't, it doesn't do any good, Pa! Kill that boy, and we've got to find another. Kill the Toad, and we've got nothing!"

And Quentin closed his eyes again, placing his head against the Toad's head and inviting her into his mind. Again stars appeared. Was this another world? No, he realized, it was Earth, and nearby. He couldn't tell where, but it was sandhills country, fancy ships nestled inside camouflaged holes and a dozen Toads waiting, close enough to suffer and close enough to lend their strength . . . minds united and everyone chanting together, in thought:

"Bear together what one cannot.

"Bear together what one cannot.

"Bear together what one cannot.

"Bear together what one cannot. . . ."

He was dragged from the dugout and down the hill, Buckner putting him to bed with a torrent of threats; then Quentin managed to sleep, even dream, dream voices asking, "Are you awake?" Then, "Does this hurt?" He flinched, waking up. "Broken ribs are bad," Gertie maintained. "Do they hurt much?"

He tried rolling over in bed. What time was it?

"I don't think they're broken," the girl told him. "Just try and keep still, will you?"

His wounds were like stiff bands along his back and sides. Even breathing was work. But she'd brought him more of the ageless hash and plenty of water, and he managed to eat while lying on his belly, her helping with the first bites, then confessing, "I can't stay too long."

"Is it morning?"

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"Afternoon."

Already. He felt so tired, twisting his head enough to look through the open door, the sun already dropping and fear clotting up inside him, making him cough and squirm.

"I'll talk to him," she was saying. "I'll get him to wait, skip a night or two."

Suddenly Quentin needed to piss. There was a burning sensation, urgent and sharp.

"You need rest," she maintained.

"No," he muttered, "I want it done."

"What?"

He said, "Get out of here. Just leave me alone."

She rose, gathering her things and obeying. Then Quentin managed to sit up, discovering that he could stand, shuffling to the corner and taking a long piss. A single spear of light showed blood, but not much. He returned to bed, eating the last of the food and drinking the water, then falling back to sleep, time leaping forward again.

He awoke in the night, someone talking.

Gertie? The voice came close, saying, "No, not now," and then the bar came off the door—*thunk*—and the door was open, Buckner saying:

"Sweet on him, are you?"

"No." She said it once, with certainty.

"Don't grouse," said her father. "God, you're starting to sound like . . . like *her*. . . ."

Silence. A tension.

Then Gertie said, "If he dies, who will you beat? You'll have to find someone else—"

"What's the matter with this family? First John, now you. What? You think I like any of this?" A pause, then he said, "Tell me what you think, darling."

"Someone's going to miss someone," she replied. "If people come looking for the next man, and they find us—"

"Won't happen."

"—and if they find our Toad too—"

"Quit!"

"—and take it from us. What then?"

"They can try it," he growled. But the voice had doubt in it. Worry. There was a long pause, then he said, "These creatures are demons, darling. You know that."

She said nothing.

"Didn't they poison your poor mother's head?"

"I know. . . ."

"Everything is for you, Gertie. You and the boys."

"I know that, Pa."

"And I want this fellow alive. You think I don't?"

"And I'm just saying, Pa, would you leave him alone for a night? Let him heal a little bit, can you?"

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"God, you do sound like her. Sometimes."

Gertie was silent.

"Weak," he whispered. Then he said, "Just tonight, okay," and stepped closer, a warm night breeze moving with him. Quentin remained still, pretending to be asleep. He could feel Buckner's stare, then his touch, a big hand clamping hold of his jaw and shaking him, the man saying, "Looks half-dead anyway. . . ."

Gertie said, "I guess."

The hand was human, warm and damp, but somehow it felt more alien than the Toad's touch. There was nothing behind it. Nothing but a coldness, an emptiness, worse than anything out between the stars.

"Let him sleep," Gertie suggested.

"Why not?" He let go of Quentin, stepping back and saying, "Let's go home and sleep ourselves. Okay, darling?"

"Whatever you say, Pa."

He didn't hear the door opening again, sleeping through it. Then he heard metal striking metal in a soft way, and someone touched one of his ankles, making his chain clatter. Gertie was working on the locks. Quentin rolled over, and she whispered, "We've got to hurry." A burlap sack was on the floor, filled and waiting. "I got food. Water. We've got to go as far as possible by morning—"

"Shush," he said, sitting up. One leg was free. Gertie had a key in the other lock, and he turned it for her, finishing the job. Then with both hands he worked on his ankles, trying to bring back their feeling. "You've got all the keys, don't you?"

She blinked and looked down, acting surprised to find the ring in her hands. "What do you mean?"

"Where's your pa?"

She breathed and said, "Sleeping. Elmer and Ty too—"

"And John's in the dugout?" John worried him almost as much as Buckner did.

"What are you thinking?" she asked. She straightened her skirt once, then again. "Don't even think it, Quentin."

He stared at her. It was dark enough that her face was obscured by shadows. He was thinking about a lot of things at once, and nothing. What was there to decide? Everything was pointing him toward one thing, and he knew it, and it felt a little like destiny should feel. Then Gertie guessed what he had decided, telling him, "You can't. That's stupid . . . it can't be done. . . ."

"Quiet," he said.

She picked up the sack, then set it down again.

"Where are my boots?"

There was a long pause, then she kneeled and pulled the boots from the burlap sack, her soft voice saying, "I can't help you."

"Where's my gun?"

"I'll run," she promised. "I will." Except she wouldn't. She told him

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she would help, not with words but with their sound. Then she watched him reach into the sack, pulling out his belt and revolver, him making sure the gun was loaded and saying:

"I had a gold coin. Did you see it?"

"Pa took it."

And he was glad to hear it. He found himself thinking that the coin's weight would slow him down, if only a little bit—

—and she was saying, "I just want to get away from *him*. Just to get free, if only for a minute. You know? Just for once. Just to know how it would be."

Clouds hid the little slice of the moon, and Quentin was walking, feeling stiff and sore and wondrous. The absence of leg irons was almost delicious. He led Gertie partway up the hill, not straight for the dugout but at an angle, then sending her on a mission and her making him promise not to hurt anyone. "I won't," he said, believing it. A steady wind kept the dry grass moving, covering every little sound. He went up and hooked back and came down to see Gertie talking with her baby brother, distracting him. It was simple to creep up behind him, onto the dugout's thick roof, then place the gun barrel against the kid's head.

He stiffened, saying, "Please don't."

"Quiet." Quentin took the long rifle and made the kid lie down, then tied him down with scrap rope. Gertie stood back, not quite watching. Quentin rose and told her what to do now, pulling the keys from her hands.

They went below. He put the rifle down and started on the locks, and Gertie was saying, "John? John? I brought you something to eat."

There was a sound, not distant, hushed by the thick door and piled earth. Quentin paused and listened, thinking that it sounded rather like a cow bell. Then he remembered the alarm strung through the airhole. The kid must have crawled to it, using his teeth to tug on the cord . . . and he pushed at the door, telling Gertie, "Help me!"

Hinges creaked, moved. He smelled the Toad, then saw it, then saw John with his shotgun leveled at the Toad, him shouting, "Get back, you, or I swear I'll kill it!"

Quentin froze, then said, "Shoot me instead."

A good idea. John started to turn now, and Quentin ran, lowering a shoulder and colliding with him. The shotgun discharged, pieces of timber falling over them, and they upset the table and the kerosene lamp, breaking it open, smoky yellow fire filling the room with light.

Quentin used his revolver, striking the larger man's face. Then he kicked him and aimed, pulling back on the hammer and the man glaring at him, wiping blood from his face and blinking fast. Then he was rising to his feet, almost smiling, turning and Quentin saying, "Don't." But he wouldn't shoot, both of them sensing it, and the brother was through the doorway and gone. "Damn," he muttered, uncocking the revolver and putting it away.

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A plaintive wet voice said, "Hurry?"

The Toad. Quentin knelt and tried the wrong key twice, then found the right one and unfastened the chains. Gertie was standing outside, watching them. She said, "But it can't walk, so how can we take it?" She said, "Let's leave it and go."

Quentin looked at the ugly face, at the deep dark eyes. "Hold me around the neck," he told the creature. "Hold tight!"

The thick arms were like an old woman's, pulpy and weak. The stumps shone in the firelight. The Toad was saying, "Soon soon sisters coming now *soon!*" Her legs managed to wrap themselves around his waist, and on their way out the door, passing Gertie, she touched her astonished face with a long hand, saying, "Thank you thank you thank you!"

Then Quentin stopped and turned, seeing Gertie silhouetted by the flickering light. "Run," he told her. "I can't carry both of you!"

There was a shot, distant and almost soft; then came a long stretch with no sounds but them running through the grass, breathing hard and sometimes a little gasp from the Toad. Carrying it was like carrying a little woman, light bones under the soft meat. But Quentin was tired at the start, and by the time they reached the hilltop, he was exhausted, slumping to the ground and panting, looking back at the dugout and seeing nothing. No fire was visible, but then the smell of it reached them on the wind. He listened for sounds. Shots, close voices. But there was nothing until he was up again, moving again, the Toad holding tight and a second shot booming somewhere below.

Now the Toad pulled itself higher, pressing its head against Quentin's head, filling him with sudden sights and strange living smells. The sky seemed lit up, a reddish sun in place of the moon, and the harsh prairie was replaced with soft wet foliage, round leaves and radiant round flowers of every color. This country had the same dips and hills as the real one. It was the Toad's world, he sensed, but laid over the sandhills; and Quentin felt as if he weighed almost nothing, every stride long and the air sweet and him down the hill and halfway up the next one before he was spent, his legs collapsing under him, the connection shattered. . . .

Gertie struggled to keep up. She said, "Wait," too loudly, half-running and then dropping to her knees. "Not so fast!"

There was a shot, then two more. They sounded like signals, someone telling someone, "They're over here."

Quentin asked the Toad, "Where are your sisters?"

"Near," she offered. "Soon soon."

He made himself stand again, reaching for the Toad. It took him three tries before he had her on his back, and Gertie sobbed, telling him, "I can't . . . not yet. . . ."

He couldn't wait. All that mattered was keeping away from Buckner, and Buckner only wanted the Toad. Again he was running, and the cool head touched his head, images flooding into him. Again he saw the red sun and sweet foliage, like a scene painted on window glass and laid over

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the real world. Toads are giants on their own world, he sensed. There were no predators, no enemies, no subterfuge or greed or even the weakest violence. Had Gertie's mama seen this place? he wondered. Then he knew she had, yes. In an instant, without words, he learned how she had enjoyed the occasional taste of this other realm. Some residual sense of the woman remained in the Toad's mind—glimpses of her hard life; foreshadowings of her death—and he concentrated on her, not his running. The hill crested, dry sand underfoot, and he never saw the hole. One leg went out underneath him, and Quentin was pitched forward, wrenching his knee. He tried to stand again and fell, the knee on fire. The Toad was crawling on the bare sand, moaning softly. Then he heard someone else, someone running toward them, and he grabbed his revolver and cocked the hammer and aimed at the sound.

He saw nothing . . . nothing . . . then a large figure bearing down on them. Buckner! The man didn't see him in the sandy hole, and Quentin couldn't miss at this range. The perfect target. He quit breathing, quit thinking, squeezing the trigger with the revolver's sight squarely on the man's chest . . . and the *boom* was enormous, a flash of light reaching past Buckner, his face lit up and something wrong . . . somehow he'd missed, a hand pushing on his forearm and Quentin realizing it was the Toad's hand. The Toad had made him miss. "Must not no no never no," it was whispering. "No no no."

Buckner stared at them, then laughed. Then he said, "Drop it," and Quentin was staring at his rifle, its barrel pointed at his heart. He began to shiver, asking the Toad:

"Why didn't you let me?"

Except he knew why, knew everything. He dropped his revolver, Buckner laughing louder, saying, "Toad, my friend, you've gone too far. Too far." He said, "Know what? This gold is just the start. A downpayment, if you know what I mean. Think you're getting rid of me? Hell, I'm leaving you to my sons, and their sons. We're going to milk your sisters dry. . . !"

Gertie came up behind him, stopped and watched them. She didn't make any sound.

"First my wife," said Buckner. "Now my daughter. You are demons, you are. Turning them against me. . . ."

And Quentin said, "Gertie's mother undid the leg irons, didn't she? Before you chopped off the feet—"

"The woman went crazy," Buckner snapped.

"Then you drowned her. Didn't you?" The words shot out on their own, certain and true. He knew parts of what had happened from the Toad, from what it had felt. The rest came from intuition and guesswork, him knowing about Buckner's rage. "I bet you stuck her head underwater—"

"Shut up!"

"—then made it look like an accident. Didn't you?"

"No," said Buckner. "You're wrong."

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Except he was lying, his voice saying so. He was a little off-balance, dropping the rifle and glancing back at his daughter.

"He murdered her," Quentin shouted. A couple of the brothers were emerging from the darkness, hearing everything. "And he'll murder you next, Gertie. You know he will!"

Buckner took a step, aiming again. "Shut up!"

So dark, Quentin was thinking. Not a hint of starlight. He glanced upward, seeing blackness with a greater blackness at its center, and he felt a sudden crackling sensation building around him. Grains of dry sand were lifted, moving with a soft sound. They blew into Buckner's face, blinding him; and he lurched backward, crying, "What in hell?"

Some type of rope, thin and quick, jerked the rifle from his hands. More ropes descended, taking the man's arms and then his kicking legs, and he was free of the ground, spinning and little and cursing, being pulled up into the blackness. A ship! Without lights, with just a whisper of noise . . . the promised sisters . . . and Quentin felt them in the air, united thoughts spilling into him, soothing his mind and him thinking of nothing now but sleep. He saw his revolver being carried away. The brothers shouted, their rifles gone too. Painless sweet sleep . . . Buckner's voice softening, then gone, and Quentin's eyes pulling themselves shut . . . a long-earned rest beginning. . . .

Gertie woke him, like always.

"How do you feel?" were her first words. She was wiping his face with a damp rag, sitting on the edge of the bed. It was the shack again, nobody else there. "The Toads are gone," she told him. "And Pa. They took him with them."

"Where?"

"I don't know," she admitted, her voice soft and unsorry.

It was daytime again. It was tomorrow.

"My brothers carried you here." She wrung the rag dry, then said, "We're going to leave. I don't know where, but John says there's no point in staying. We've got to start over somewhere."

"Are they mad at me?"

Gertie said, "They were. Not anymore."

"He killed your mother. Do they know that?"

She managed to nod.

"You're leaving with them?"

She said, "I should. I really should."

He watched her face, feeling sorry for what she had gone through and wanting to tell her so. He wanted to say plenty, but nothing had the strength to show itself. "When do you go?" he asked after a long pause; and she said:

"In the morning. We're packing now."

He nodded.

She stood and said, "We'll leave you your horse and saddle, and I'll make you some food."

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"Okay."

"Rest," she recommended. "Go on and rest."

But he slept badly, waking a little after dark and feeling someone wiping at his back with a soapy rag. He rolled over, happy and expectant, asking, "Are you done packing?"

It was the Toad cleaning his wounds. Not Gertie.

Quentin gave a little shout, then laughed. And the Toad's mouth tried to grin, muscles pulling in ways not intended and everything lit by a tiny light floating above them. She put down the rag and reached into a little satchel stuck to her waist. What was it? "Yours," she explained, handing him something small and familiar. Heavy and warm.

It was the gold coin given to him by the banker, ages ago.

He said, "Thanks. Where was it?"

"Buckner," she replied. "Buckner had."

And now it was his again. Squinting, he noticed marks etched into the smooth face, on both sides, and he asked, "What are these?"

She dipped her head, touching his forehead. Then he knew.

They were instructions. Directions. Here was how he could find the little world with its golden lake; and now she said, "Payment for you and thank you thank you."

As if he could go there, he thought.

And she read his mind, then said, "Soon . . . your species smart, very smart . . . in one or two hundred years, we think. . . !"

That was soon?

"Leave coin to your children's children, for their inheritance." She grinned once again, her joy seeping into him. "With our thanks for your help your courage your strength. . . ."

Two hundred years wasn't long, not to them. Quentin made himself sit up and ask, "You brought me here intentionally, didn't you?" But he knew that already, adding, "It started with the poker game, didn't it?"

"Our plan, yes yes. Find a good and sensitive human boy, whom the girl would find sympathetic—"

"You used me," he growled.

The Toad said nothing. Dark eyes closed, then opened.

He tried to be angry and couldn't manage it. The best he could do was hold up the coin, saying, "This isn't much of a payment, considering."

And now the Toad gave a tiny grin.

Forget it. Instead Quentin asked, "Where did you take Buckner? What did you do with him?"

Again she touched their heads together. And he knew. He saw himself floating over the cold golden lake, thinking how the Toads had never, never intended to bring it to Earth. No, it was built for a different purpose. There was a chamber carved in its center, filled with air and fancy machines meant to keep a person alive—*the one they blame*—and that great gold coin was nothing but an elaborate jail intended for Buckner, probably from the very first. . . .

He blinked and saw the Toad standing before him. Walking. Bright

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new metal feet made humming sounds, and she walked slowly, with care and with joy. "Again thank you thank you," the creature was telling him. "Thank you forever dear friend. . . !"

He wondered how it would feel to be Buckner, alone on a tiny dead world, encased in gold . . . then he realized that the Toad had gone, out the door and her floating light extinguished. He made himself stand and limp after her, the bad knee aching but not too badly. He pocketed his coin, wanting urgently to say good-bye; but there was no Toad visible, nor any flying ship. It was a clear evening. Starlight showed him someone over at the lake, on the shoreline, and he walked, then rested. Then walked faster, no one visible and him feeling scared. He couldn't tell why. He reached the cattails and mud, a thin trail leading into deeper water; and while he stood there, his weight on the good leg, Gertie came out of the water with soap and a towel and nothing else. Her hair was out of its bun, hanging loose over her shoulders, and she was looking at him, not quite smiling. He couldn't talk, couldn't think; and after a long minute, she was the one to speak, asking him:

"What do you want?"

He limped forward.

And now she smiled. No doubt about it, the girl knew how to smile. ●

If Angels Ate Apples

If angels ate apples, potatoes and pears
they'd grow to be chubby and cheerful as bears
nibbling knishes and other such things,
tickling your face with the tips of their wings

If seraphim shouted and whistled at girls,
drank drafts from thimbles, all friends with the world
drained the best ale and chased it with rye,
then fluttered in circles while trying to fly

Angels on tables! (Watch out for your glass!)
Slipping on puddles, right plop on their ass!
Laughing at music that only they hear,
then tweaking the barmaids a pinch on the rear.

Fuzzy fat angels, that's something to see,
as they dance to the jukebox at quarter to three,
and ace out the pinball, a marvelous feat,
the lights and bells flashing (though sometimes they cheat).

If angels made merry, would that be so odd?
Must they always be solemn, to stay friends with God?
It's a pity that Heaven is so far away
angels hardly ever come down and just *play*.

—Geoffrey A. Landis

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SNOW SCENE WITH FROZEN RABBIT

William John Watkins

The author has published fourteen books, over two hundred poems, and more than fifty short stories and articles. Mr. Watkins's work is also available on-line through Clarinet Communications' *Library of Tomorrow.*

Art: Steve Cavallo

I almost went past the room. There were no guards, and I didn't expect the father to be in there. I'd forgotten how alike all Academy rooms were once you turned off the holograms. Back when I went, you were lucky if you could make a room look like a *picture* of paradise. Now you could have the sea washing up on a floor of sand right to your bed, and have

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the shush of the wavelets and the smell of salt air and wave-broken crabs so intense you'd believe you were right out there in the south sea's sunlight. If you could keep your mind on studying, you could even have a busload of naked coeds walk through occasionally looking for a wild vacation, and you wouldn't know they weren't real unless you reached out to touch them. That's the kind of room I was expecting, and that's the kind I saw most of the way down the hall.

It made me wonder what my son Keri's room was like. He always turned the holos off when it was Parents Day. *Always* was a lie. There'd been seven while he was away; I'd only been to one, when he was a freshman, and only then because his grades had slipped half a point. There are a lot of distractions in college, especially for a freshman, and I just wanted to make sure he wasn't slipping into something he couldn't get himself out of.

I didn't get a lot out of him about it. "I have nothing to confess," was all he said. I could've told him everybody has *something* to confess, but I didn't. Whatever it was, he straightened it out himself by the end of the year. I could always interrogate the truth out of anybody but Keri. So all I got was a bunch of monosyllables for a while, and then I dropped it, and he showed me around campus like I'd never been on one, and eventually he said he had to go to class and I said it didn't matter, I had an investigation nearby and that was that.

I hadn't thought about that in a long time. I guess the father reminded me of myself, standing there with his hands clasped behind his back, which is why I stopped. All the way down the hall, every door I looked in led to a different place. There were about fifty basic scenes, from mountain ledges to castles, to stalactite-dripping caves, but you could add personal touches. This kid had added nuances to a snow scene. It was near dusk with gray, lowering clouds threatening snow, so you knew it wasn't his study scene, there wasn't enough light. A small flock of crows was landing in a line of trees in the middle distance one after another until the trees were filled and some of the flock had to go on to tree lines further away. They went with a disappointed cry as if they'd flown a long way and every wingbeat was a labor.

The land rolled down and away everywhere, barren fields with erratic lines of trees rising like tufts of hair out of gullies. It felt like Iowa in February but without the bone-cutting wind. There was a kind of crossbreeze, but diminishing, like the wind was just dying down between gusts. The father was shivering, but it wasn't really that cold. Even the snow seemed blotched with gray, random patches of hard frozen earth scraped clear by the wind waiting to be recovered. No farmhouses. A line or two of snow fences, largely drifted over, to show somebody was within riding distance, but if there were people, they were over the hill or down in one of the gullies and out of sight.

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You can tell a lot by the way a person makes up a room, even an office. Mine's a medieval dungeon with a string of past bosses hung on the walls, sweating and groaning in the firelight. Standard fare for an Interrogator, except I have a clown with orange hair and a white neck ruffle who comes through with a feather duster and tickles their feet occasionally.

I didn't know what Keri's room was like. But then he hadn't seen my office except once when he was five and his mother brought him to visit and I forgot to change the scene. It made him cry at first, but before I could shift it to Sherlock Holmes' consulting room, the clown came by and Keri laughed. I don't know what made me think of that at that moment. Maybe it's just that nothing incongruous interrupted that snow scene. It wasn't a place anybody could get a laugh, and whatever surprises it hid didn't seem like they'd be funny.

There was a lot of personalized detail to it though, even down to a rabbit frozen in the snow at the father's feet. You wouldn't walk past that kind of intensity without looking in, but most people would have shivered and gone on by. I only stopped because it seemed familiar to me somehow. I thought the right room was further down the hall. The kid's voice threw me off too.

There was a wind rising; you could almost feel it in the hall, and it seemed to blow some of the words away. I took a step in through the doorway even though I thought it wasn't my case. It felt like something was going to happen there an Interrogator would want to stop.

His father was blocking sight of the kid, but I could see part of him whenever he shuffled to his left. He was pacing back and forth and stopping periodically to gesture. It was a frantic pacing, and his hand kept coming up like it was trying to grasp something and then falling back down.

The kid's voice went up, or the wind dropped, and I could suddenly hear him very clearly. The crows startled up from the nearest trees and took off into the distance, calling in short sharp cries that seemed to end in sobs. "I can't stand it here any more!" he said, "I keep trying to tell you! Please! Please, let me come home!" He had that hand up, palm toward his father like he was trying to touch him. It wasn't until it passed right through the man that I realized the kid was a hologram.

The father nodded. His voice sounded like the crows. "Why didn't you tell me it was this bad?! I thought you were just homesick. I wanted you to stick it out, graduate, get a good life. I just want you to be happy. That's all I ever wanted." He reached out and his hand passed right through the holo of his son. He started to cry after that, and the holo shut off, and I knew I was in the right room after all.

In a lot of ways it was just like the snow scene—bare walls, and a pull-out slab to write on, and a spare, narrow bed, precisely made with stiff white sheets. You could see it now that the snow was gone, the boy's

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body hanging there by a piece of rough cord knotted around a hook he must've bought himself and screwed into the ceiling. I didn't think I needed to talk to the father to file my report. There wasn't anything I could say anyway. I just backed out and stood in the hall for a while.

It seemed very late to me even though it was noon time, and I felt very old. I thought about Keri and I went down the hall and stepped into a ComLink. It was a small room, barely a closet, and I could only get a vertical slice of Keri's room when I called. The holos were off. He looked surprised and then suddenly worried. "What's wrong?" he said.

I told him, "Nothing. I'm coming down that way tomorrow. I thought I'd stop in."

His forehead wrinkled for an instant and then went back to normal. He was getting real good at putting up a mask. That's one of the things the Academy teaches you, "Keep it to yourself. Don't let it show." It was the right thing for a Negotiations major. "Fine," he said. His voice had just the right amount of professional disinterest in it.

"I wanted to talk to you," I said.

He didn't let the surprise show. "What about?" he said.

"Mistakes," I said. He frowned outright. "*My* mistakes," I told him. He couldn't keep the surprise out of his face.

"Is something wrong?" he said. Even Academy training couldn't keep the worry out of his voice. I wondered if he ever heard the worry in mine, or if all he heard was evaluation.

"Yeah," I said. "But I'm going to try to make it right." And then that old inarticulateness came up between us again, and there was a long pause. I could feel the wind rising down the hall.

"I'm finished with classes at one," he said. He sounded like he was afraid I'd change my mind. "Meet me here?"

I nodded and he looked like he was going to break the Link. I felt like if he did, I'd be standing in another blank room with a different body hanging over me. I was surprised how easily the words came. "Keri?" It was a tone I know he hadn't heard since he was thirteen or so. He seemed like he was a million light years away and fading. I could hear the crows crying, flying on to distant trees, and it made me afraid I'd never get there in time and I wanted it said. "I love you."

There was a titter of embarrassed laughter from somewhere behind him. It never occurred to me somebody might be there. I thought he'd just nod and break the link. But he said, "I love you too, dad. See you tomorrow."

When I got to his room the holos were on. It was a medieval dungeon with a string of past professors hung on the walls, sweating and groaning in the firelight. Right after I came in, a clown with orange hair and a white neck ruffle came through with a feather duster and tickled their feet. ●

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Ian McDonald

THE UNDIFFERENTIATED OBJECT OF DESIRE

Ian McDonald's work appears far too rarely in our pages. His last *Asimov's* piece, "Toward Kilimanjaro," was our August 1990 cover story. An earlier tale, "King of Morning, Queen of Day" (May 1988), became the basis of a highly acclaimed novel. The novel, which shared the story's title, was the winner of the 1992 Philip K. Dick Award. Mr. McDonald's most recent publications include a short story collection, *Speaking in Tongues* (Bantam) and a graphic novel, *Kling, Klang, Klatch* (Dark Horse). Two other books, *Necroville* and *Scissors Cut Paper Wrap Stone,* are also due out from Bantam.

Art: Gary Freeman

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Red rain; falling on the roofs and streets of this rain-dirt-town, pouring down, driving down, streaming through the litter-choked gutters, bouncing from the sleek hot-waxed curves of the slow crawling cars, soaking through your clothes in an instant but you do not care for it is only rain, only water, and water—even this shit-city's night-rain—cannot hurt you; has not water always been the friend of your people, your mother, your womb, did your ancestors not come bursting in a spray of starlight and water from mother sea? It cannot hold you down the way they held you down, huge heavy bodies pressing pressing huge alien faces grinning grinning, the hand over your mouth: *you make one noise, one noise, and you're fucking dead you understand you fucking Sheenie bitch?* and you are splashing through the running, gurgling gutters, waving at the slow-passing cars *stop stop please stop*, you beat on their windows, press your hands to the rain-wet glass *help me please,* but the faces cocooned in LED cockpit glow are the same meat moon animal faces as those others, those *men: hold her still, for fuck's sake, get her legs, her legs, the mats, get the fucking mats* and you felt it press into your face, your chest, suffocating you with its stench of rubber and dust and *man* sweat. You struggled, you fought to breathe *get on top of it, that'll fucking hold her* but the weight of the *man* on top of the tumble-mat crushed your life in your breast and at the memory of the stench you kneel in the gutter and vomit it up and the swirling-running rain carries it away down to the drains as the car horns blare and the *men* drivers shout to get out of the road stupid bitch jeez Sheenie whadja expect from a *Sheenie?* The rainwater runs over your hands, *help* you whisper, *help me,* but there is no hope, no help in the headlights and the slush of wet radials has their voices hidden in it *get her pants down get them down get them down down down* handclaps accelerating, voices blurring into a roar *down down downdowndown . . .* and you were naked, you were exposed to their fingers, their hands. You writhed, you screamed, but the massive weight of sports mats pinned you *let's see her tits; nah! don't you know? Fucking Sheenies don't have no tits; Go on boy, go on, get it in give it to her, it's what she wants in in inininin . . .* and a roar went up and it struck into you, struck like lightning, like something tearing out your womb, and you wanted to scream from the *pain* that was like no pain you had ever known, not even when you had the twins in the first year after the landing, and the voices were counting now *one-ah, two-ah, three-ah,* and each count was a thrust of white fire into the core of your femaleness, and the voice on top of you shoving you into the smothering stink of the gym mats was whining *come on come on, I want a go, I want a fucking*

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go and kneeling in the gutter, in the driving rain, there is nothing left to vomit, nothing for the water to swirl away.

The sudden light is so bright as to be heard—a keen white hiss—as much as seen. You squint through your fingers: chrome, blue, white, fluorescents. Hazard warning lights semaphoring orange; a single spot-eye staring at you. Their ugly words always were difficult for you: *Metropolitan Police.* A voice, one of their *women.*

"Oh Jesus." A crackle of radios. "Come on love, come on, you're all right. It's all right. Don't be afraid. We're here to help, love. What happened? Can you talk about it? Come on, get into the car, we'll get you to a hospital. What's your name, love? We have to call you something."

You tell her. And you know then that there is no help, no help, even in the law, for you hear the policewoman's voice go out of her in a breath of a whisper of a word that she thinks you cannot hear.

Shi'an.

RETROSPECTIVE 1

Memory test.

Score one each if you can remember exactly where you were and what you were doing when you heard the news of the following events:

Enola Gay drops the Fat Boy on Hiroshima.

President John F. Kennedy takes a single bullet (disputed) fired from the roof of the Dallas Book Repository (disputed) in the brain (disputed).

Elvis Presley overdoses.

NASA space shuttle "Challenger" blows up eight miles above the sharp apex of the Bermuda Triangle.

Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland succumbs after twenty days of official denial to throat cancer.

"Coronation Street" is interrupted to bring you confirmation from the White House that the Euro-American *Columbus* Saturn planetary probe has encountered the eighty-eight starships of the Shi'an Fifteenth Interstellar Fleet hiding in the radiation-shadow of Europa.

CHAPTER 1

The *thing* about Lipsitz's Bread Lane Bagel Shop is actually three things.

1: That they boil the trays of bagels for exactly three minutes before ovening; thus ensuring the even, dense texture that is the sign and seal of a *mechaieh kosher* bagel.

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2: That they use only slow-smoked dill-marinated salmon fresh via Aeroflot from Archangel in the lox'n'cream-cheese special.

3: That they stay open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three-hundred-sixty-four days a year, the first day of Passover excepted, which, with the above, makes it the perfect place for Lyndon Badou to wait while the expert systems clash and cross-examine and a court twelve hours ahead in Auckland, New Zealand, reaches a verdict on the case of Beckett v. Haringey Council.

It's a long-established favorite with contract lawyers, Lipsitz's. Midweek can see as many as twenty 4x4s parked up on the curb. This night only Lyndon Badou's Q-reg Toyota Landcruiser keeps company with the sour September rain; Lyndon Badou, the Man Himself, is up at the chrome-edge white melamine counter with diverse all-night-cowboys pros-any-way-up-you-like-them devos freakos pervos streetsweepers nightwatchmen dreamkeepers. Plus portable fax, keeping one eye on the sunward half of the planet.

"What's the odds?" asks Solly Lipsitz, splitting an onion-poppyseed with that flick of the knife that only comes from forty years of four A.M.S.

"The 'ware only gave a 67 percent probability on the bid I tendered," says Lyndon Badou, sugaring black, mighty coffee from a chrome-nosed sifter like no one's seen anywhere else since 1973.

"You should change your 'ware," says Solly Lips. "You ask me, it all got shot to hell with everything else when they privatized it."

Ting says the portafax. *Ffth* goes the hi-speed laser printer.

Auckland Crown Court, Case 184/76C: Beckett v. Haringey Council. Court finds for the defendant. Judgment follows. Page 1 of 3.

Fuck, says Lyndon Badou. Julee, the hooker he does not like and who does not like him, laughs. White trash bitch'll be dead before the next tax year from HIV IV, he hopes/expects. A gush of steam, another tray of bagels takes the 212 degree bath.

"So?" asks Solly.

"The judge ruled that the plaintiff's accessing the Gillan v. Ross Perot University of Nebraska verdict 2003 established precedent of non-liability of sub-contractors under governmental or quasi-governmental bodies."

"Nebraska?"

"It's world law now. Pick your courts, pick your laws. Beckett couldn't seriously expect database searches for that level of information on the tender she accepted."

"Appeal?"

"The odds are lousy. Some hungry suit on the street will go for it, chance to make a name. Not me."

The faxprinter is still sheeting out the Honorable Justice Carswell's

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verdict when Lyndon Badou's car calls him on his inside pocket. His agentware has picked up a general circulation brief. Data follows.

Public Prosecution.

Never touches it. No *glamor.*

Criminal Case.

Definitely not, not even with Chernobyl opera gloves.

Complaint of rape.

Civil cases, compensation, petty suings, even the odd public defense: *yes.* Prosecutor in a rape case. No. No. Not ever. But Lyndon Badou knows, and Solly Lips knows, and even Julee Hooker w/ the big disease w/ the little name twinkling in her bloodstream knows, that with Beckett v. Haringey Council the *fourth* case in a row Lyndon Badou has lost for his client, his agency 'ware in the back of his Toyota is going to have to put in bids so low they will not even keep him in onion bagels, let alone the interest-only payments on his room w/ shower in Chelsea Docks.

Man cannot live by principles alone.

He calls his car back to generate estimates, check court availability, and submit a provisional tender. The coffee is cold and puke-sweet with sedimented sugar, but he sips it and watches the bagels come and go from the gas ovens. How, he wonders, can a man whose father survived the Holocaust be in a business with *gas ovens?* Toyota chirps him back. *Yes.* At a price that will barely cover his telecom, database, and court time-share bills in Auckland. But in the Darwinian arena of freelance law, *rep* is more to be desired than much fine gold, sweeter also than honey, and the honey comb. The fax *ffths* again.

The complainant is a twenty-four-year-old female Shi'an immigrant. . . .

"Fuck . . . " says Lyndon Badou.

THE EXAMINATION

"Okay, if you could just slip out of your things and put on this gown . . . we need to check them for hairs, semen, things like that, skin flakes, things we can get a positive DNA spread on. That's great, good girl."

"Okay, if you'd just turn a little to your left . . . good, that's fine. Now, lift up your robe, up a bit more . . . just want to get a shot of the teeth marks. That's fine. Right, open your thighs just a little wider—just a wee bit more . . . fine. That's good. And the back please. Great. Thanks."

"Okay, we're just going to take a few swabs—it may be a little uncomfortable . . . sorry, just hold it a few seconds longer. I know you feel like you want a shower more than anything else, but we just need these few

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samples. . . . Great. Good. And under your nails with this little probe, see if there's any skin, anything that we can get a trace from. Just one moment more . . . that's good. That's great."

"Okay, Officer Blackwood is going to take a preliminary statement. Don't worry if you can't remember it all, this is just a preliminary, just to get a few facts straight. You'll find more coming back to you after a couple of days. Just tell Constable Blackwood whatever you remember, anything, it doesn't matter what order. She won't push you to talk about anything you don't want to talk about right now. Okay? Great."

"Okay. Well, we've matched DNA with identities for three of the five men you say attacked you. We're going to pick them up and maybe you can help identify them?"

"Okay, Doia? Doia, I'm Lyndon Badou. Your Prosecuting Counsel. I'll be conducting the case for the Crown on your behalf. Hi. The police have given me full access to the case files, but if there's anything else you remember any time, any place, call me on either of these numbers, okay? My 'ware will make sure I get it. We're going to nail these bastards by the balls, Doia. Trust me."

RETROSPECTIVE 2

John Simpson, BBC Chief Foreign Correspondent, reporting live from Goondabindie, United States of Australia Air Force Base, June 16, 1998, 08:25 Central Australian Time.

The scenes here in Goondabindie are quite the most extraordinary I think I've ever seen. Behind us are the tents, caravans, campervans, and cars of what the authorities here estimate to be a million people; though by our calculations that's a gross underestimate; we're standing at the edge of what can only be described as an entire city the size of, say, Darwin, lifted and dropped in the very middle of Australia's Red Centre. Perhaps I can give you some idea of the numbers of people here if I tell you that at the last report there was a twenty-mile tail back from the main gate.

Unfortunately, they, and we, have been frustrated by the weather; as you can see, there's a heavy layer of cloud at about five, six thousand feet, so we'll not get to see them until final approach. It's T-minus fifteen; Goondabindie Control have the landers on radar about sixty miles up over the Gulf of Carpenteria. There was a small shock just a minute or so before we came on air; the authorities had tried to warn people to stay away because of possible gravitational disturbances caused by the Mach drive fields; indeed, as you know, these climatic and seismic wobbles

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were the reason for the approach being over sparsely inhabited areas . . . there, did you get that on your picture? A distinct tremor. It would take a physicist to explain properly, but, from the technical releases, I understand that the Shi'an technology somehow manipulates the universal constant background gravitational field—Mach's principle—to create a local imbalance that accelerates their ships to virtually lightspeed. There . . . again . . . the ground beneath my feet is vibrating. Goondadindie Control reports that the first wave of landers—twenty-six of them—are only fifty miles to the north of us, rapidly descending from ninety-eight thousand feet. ETA is two minutes twenty seconds. As you can probably see on your screens, the cloud layer is thickening into a lens-shape twenty, thirty miles across, shot through with lightning.

The wind's getting up now. Sorry about the interference, but we're having tremendous electrical displays. "Wagnerian" is the best way I can describe it. T-minus twenty-eight seconds, though it's impossible to see anything what with the flying dust and the spinning spiral of cloud . . . no, no, wait . . . here it comes, the first Shi'an ship, our first meeting with another intelligent species. . . . It's coming out of the center of the spiral cloud. It's hard to get any idea of scale, but the lander is twenty or thirty times the size of the Space Shuttle, about the size of a large car ferry, but it's coming down as lightly and smoothly as a feather. Three more have emerged from the cloud now . . . the earth is shaking so hard I'm finding it difficult to keep my balance. I don't know if you're getting this on the cameras, but the lead craft seems to be somehow changing shape as it approaches touchdown. The entire fleet is in clear sight now, all twenty-six landers. Only a couple of hundred feet now . . . all around me, people are cheering, clapping; a million voices raised together. People are crying openly, some are on their knees. Behind me is a man repeatedly crossing himself; tears are streaming down his face . . . and . . . and . . . it's *down*. The Shi'an ship has touched down. Now, it's quite extraordinary, quite quite extraordinary; the cheering and whistling and clapping has completely ceased, there is silence, utter silence. . . .

CHAPTER 2

It's the *smell* first. The *look* second, but the smell, first. Alien DNA—he'd tapped all available databases, by now an almost instinctive first action—therefore insusceptible to our diseases. And we to theirs. Alien DNA. Alien biochemistry. Alien sweats and oils and secretions. They hit him in the base of the throat, the epiglottis, eustachian tubes, sinuses; *don't smell right don't smell human, don't smell like* us.

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Lyndon Badou will tell you, he is not a prejudiced man. But his hackles are up. And not just his hackles. Pheromones. Smells to Lyndon Badou like a little *heat,* a little *flirt,* a little *toke,* like being on parade in a continuous carnival. It took a few years for them to adjust to the E-year, but now their sexual seasons fit in snugly around the terrestrial spring and autumn solstices. Eight months as pure and passionless as the angels in return for one hundred and twenty days of laser-intense lust. Rough trade. In the musk of the Shi'an town, he can catch a flicker of the heat of it; human desire may be cool, low-grade fuel, but it is always available.

The rain has only retreated, not surrendered. Puddles shivered by stray drops catch reflections of the aircraft warning beacons. The office piles, the pompous central tower—closed up before they were opened, tombstones to an unlamented Grey Age—so colossally overshadow the cluster of caravans, prefabs, and housing units piled on disused barges as to seem almost insubstantial in their incongruity. Like badly painted backdrops. Plastic banners bearing the red spray-primer sinuosities of Shi'an script hang from the disused overhead railway: Sorority identifiers. The central spaces around which the clutches of homesteads twine must be the dancefloors where the males meet, greet, and compete. Market gardens scratched in the sour soil of Heron Wharf; cardboard and plastic shelters for their sessile meat-producers. What was it the file said? *The amino acids in most terrestrial animals are toxic to the Shi'an.* Two fourteen-fifteen-year-olds in leggings, hooded sweats, and Converses, riding MTBs, cut across the weed-pocked tarmac, on orders to intercept strays and strangers.

Don't smile. Baring teeth is a hostile gesture. He flashes his eyebrows. *Yazoo* punks.

"Looking for Doia."

"Doia what?" The low, husky voice, even in youth, the unplaceable-and-so-maddeningly-familiar-in-its-unfamiliarity accent: *alien.*

"I don't know the Sorority." Wall of sound: a Boeing on final approach to Heathrow turns above the navigation markers on the tower, sweeps the remnants of Canary Wharf with its turbofans. "I'm Lyndon Badou. The lawyer?" A slow blink of long, feminine eyelashes. Shi'an smile.

"Better come with us," says the taller—male? female? gender identifiers among the Travelers are chemical rather than visual, like cats'. This one has a cat's wide, flattened features. Not ugly, just *unfamiliar.* He can see how some people find them attractive, beautiful even. The undifferentiated object of desire. First Contact: Question One: *What can we trade you?* Question Two: *When can we fuck you?* "It's not safe to leave your car here, someone might think it was one of ours. Youths down in Island Gardens have started wrecking our things, trying to get us out because the Council won't. Say they're afraid of diseases. A lot of them

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are black, like you." The kids stare a challenge at Lyndon Badou, with just a hint-glint of white enamel. Their faces are twenty shades whiter than his, *café con leche* to his *espresso*. Hair is scalp-hugging, cat-soft, cat-short fur that tapers into a narrow strip covering the spine. If they are the ages he guesses, they are original stock: Generation Zero, born thirty years before Lyndon Badou was even conceived, on the capital world of an interstellar confederation of nine star systems. They have a right to be blasé, old before their age.

"Lyndon Badou." Remember protocols. He leaves his shoes at the top of the gangplank onto the barge, waits for the palm-kiss of greeting, the exchange of chemical identifiers. Lips touch alien flesh, Lyndon Badou's heart flutters, tugged by pheromonal strings. His penis pulses. *Jeez*. . . .

"Come in. I'm Doia." The prefab is almost as small as the apartment he visits only to shower and (sometimes) sleep. Kids everywhere; slung two, three to a hammock; curled up like kittens on cushions in front of the early evening news. Multiple births the norm, until the colonial population stabilizes around the twenty, thirty million mark, so the files say. Once the ships return after the ten-year probationary period, they're on their own.

"Yours?"

She shrugs. *Yes*.

"This is Marann. She shares with me. We're both Eight House Red Enfolding Glyph Sorority." A tall, pregnant female blinks scowlingly from the kitchenette, where she is scraping and peeling an assortment of odd-shaped, worse-smelling vegetables. Her naked, swollen breasts, sweating milk, discomfort Lyndon Badou. "Anything you can tell me, you can tell her." Behind a curtain embroidered with the Twenty Eight Houses and Glyphs of the Feminine Principle is a folding caravan table, at which a third Shi'an is seated—a male, Lyndon Badou decides, picking up small physiological cues. Indecipherable things in pots line the shallow window ledge, an Airfix 1/600 scale model Shi'an starship hangs on a thread from the lamp fitting.

"Dohanye." A male name. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Badou." He shakes hands, evidence of much time spent amongst Earthmen. "I'm what passes for a lawyer around here—well, that's what I was back before the emigration. I'm here solely in an advisory capacity, this case has repercussions for the entire Shi'an colonial community." He takes a dimple-pack of aspirins from the pocket of his loose shirt, offers one to Doia, pops one himself. "Sorry we've no alcohol to give you, Mr. Badou, but as you probably know, it doesn't agree with us. Aspirin, however . . . "

Right now Lyndon Badou could commit several offenses punishable by large fines and lengthy jail sentences for a Jack Daniels. The aspirin

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seems to have a similar tranquilizing, mellowing effect on the aliens. He begins.

"The case so far is this: All but one of your attackers has been identified and charged; we'll get the last one in time, trust me. Up-link for a preliminary hearing is oh-three-hundred tonight. We've got a time-slot in a Malaysian court. It's not ideal, but the defense is pushing for a quick trial. I'm basically here to establish if you have any objections to bail being set."

Marann looks around the edge of the curtain. The smell of alien cuisine catches Lyndon Badou at the back of the throat.

"Eight thousand years of technological civilization, nine colonized planets across thirty light years, and what are we?" she says. "Sandwich deliverers. Van drivers. All-night petrol station attendants. Bicycle couriers. Private health-club cleaners. We were walking on our moons while you people were shitting in caves." A prod of her finger sends the Airfix starship orbiting on its thread.

"It's not going to help Doia's case to drag politics in screaming and kicking," says Lyndon Badou, angry at the dismissal of his planet and species, and instantly regretting his metaphor.

"How much more political can a case *get*, Mr. Lawyer-Badou?"

"I'll have to confer with their solicitors, but I'm hoping to get a trial date as quickly as possible. I want a European court; Dutch are best, but some of my colleagues have been getting good verdicts out of Slovakian software. Europeans are good on women's issues; the defense will try to move for an Islamic or South American justice system; someplace where women's rights aren't so well protected. Trust me, I won't let them get away with it."

Marann's mouth is open to judge, but Dohanye pre-empts her.

"This is more than just a women's issue; it affects not just our sister here, but our whole people. You can't understand what this means to us, what the implications really are for the Shi'an; just let it be said that there are things we've told you and things we have not told you. This should be heard in a Shi'an court, live, in real time, before the people, not in three? four? that many? minutes in whatever piece of software happens to have a timeslot free. *Our* laws. *Our* courts."

"Defense would never allow it, Mr. Dohanye." Truth is: Lyndon Badou has never realized that in these days when legal expediency can pick and choose from a worldful of judiciaries, the laws and courts and legal system of sixty light-years distant can—*must*—be considered equally valid currency. Alien law. What are its principles, how does it work, how does it achieve justice? Suddenly, in the heart of the ruins of Docklands' monetarist dream, he is sixty light-years from bed'n' shower in downtown Chelsea, and wants very much to be back there. "I'll be in touch when I

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get the result of the bail application." Dohanye slowly blinks his long, epicene eyelashes, body-speak Lyndon Badou cannot translate. "We'll get them. Trust me."

" 'Trust me'," spits Marann. "All night, you tell us, trust you, a human, trust you, a *man*. I tell you, *man,* you tell everyone, Shi'an men *love* their women."

POST-ANGLO-SAXON ATTITUDES

Parts One and Two

You've got to admire them. Eighty-eight starships, eight million people, that's the entire population of London, all in that, what do they call it? stasis, that's it, *stasis;* you got to admire them, I mean, these are guys who can bend the basic properties of the universe to their service. They could have taken this planet away from us, no problem. I heard it on the TV—you know, when it came out about the American and Russian generals who wanted to explode all these old nuclear warheads in one big fireball ahead of the fleet while it was moving from Saturn to the L5 point—they could have locked on their Mach drives and knocked Earth clean out of its orbit—well, at least hit us with a big enough seismic shock to blow us back to the twelfth century—waited ten, fifteen years or so for the dust to settle and walked in and had it all to themselves. That's what we'd have done, if it'd been us arriving at the Shi'an homeworld; but not them. No, they *asked.* They traded. You know why? They're *better* than us. That's a fact. You've only got to look at those videos they have of their planets; eight thousand years of progress, no war in nine hundred years, and they want to come to a shit-ball like *this?* You've got to admire them; they're us as we should be. Could be. Can *learn* to be, if we're not too bloody proud to be taught by them. You know, maybe it wouldn't have been such a bad thing for the universe if they had blown us all away.

Fuckpig Sheenie faggots think they can fly in and fuckin' take over the place pigfuckers first they take your jobs then they take your houses then they take your women then they're all fuckin' *over* your diz fuckpig Sheenie faggots who said you could live in my house, who said you could live in my street, who said you could live in my diz, my city, my pigfuckin' *planet?* acting so fuckin' su-pee-ree-*or* because they got pigfuckin' star*ships* but I tell you not one them's worth a pig's *fuck*; fuckin' faggots all of them, no pigfuckin' dicks, no balls; what real woman's going to look twice at a fuckin' faggot in *tights* that can't even *fight* for his diz,

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just pig-fuckin' *dance* like they're the one's fuckin' got the rhythm; well, pig-fuck, *I* got the rhythm, *we* got the rhythm Sheenie fuckpigs trying to take what's ours by claimin' they invented it thousands'a' years ago, and, listen, listen, gettin' all the government hand-outs, help us poor starvin' Sheenies, that's *pigfuck*, they've got eight-eight fuckin' star*ships* and they want foodstamps? free milk? comin' into the diz, acting like they're fuckin' *people* and they *ain't,* they ain't people, not like *we're* people, animals, that's what they are, pigfuckin' *smart* animals, but just fuckin' *animals*; well, I ain't gonna share no street, no *diz* with no fuckpig faggot Sheenie an-ee-mal, you *hear*? Fuckpig! Fuckpig! *Fuckpig!*

THE HUSTLE

Even the touch of the meat leaves you nauseous. Flat cakes of pulped mammal fat, char-grilled w/cheesesauceketchuponionpickleiceberg. You want fries with that?

The meat is bad, but not as bad as the *smile. Smile* you want fries with that? *Smile* can I take your order here, please? *Smile* small/medium/large Diet Coke?

The first day it took three aspirins to settle you after eight hours of constant aggression aggression aggression coming from these people hassling you hustling you *Big Mac quarterpound cheese plain no sauce no onions no pickles just cheese two medium fries two medium Diet Cokes.* Toothflash toothflash toothflash. "You get used to it," says Maia from the Twelfth House Blue Hilarity Glyph, an Affine of your Sorority. She found you this new job beneath the twin golden arches, now it's impossible for you to go back to the Muscle Beach Fitness Club. "They're not being unfriendly or anything. It's just their way. It helps if you watch their eyes, not the mouth. When they *smile*, they flash eyebrows, like we do."

But you still prefer the ones who don't smile. The day shifts are bad—all those young women who stare and ask excuse-me-I-hope-you-don't-think-I'm-rude-but-do-you-mind-if-I-ask-you? questions, which are always the rudest and most invasive a person can be asked—but the late-nite/early-mornings are worse. After midnight, the fragile fabric of human society unravels and you see beneath the amiable pissedness of their *men* the mask and horns of the animal that turned and savaged you. The graveyard shifts are grueling. The three hundred dark, stinking, rain-soaked meters of alley between the back door and the street where Maia picks you up in the Sorority Ford stretches to an infinity of dread and loathing.

Is it always raining on this dreary planet? You linger a moment in the

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service door ("Bye Doia," "Bye Paul;" "Bye Doia," "Bye Tracey;" "Yo, Doia," "Night, Carlo,") taking courage. *Go.*

"Hey. Bitch."

A flicker of shadow and rain. He stands silhouetted against the street, filling the alley, denying light and freedom. Step one, step two, you back away through the pouring rain. Step one, step two, he advances. You do not need to see his face; size, smell, *him.*

"You didn't think, did you? You didn't think when you went to the cops that it was anything more than just you. But it is. It's my friends; friends who have wives, and children, friends who have jobs, careers. But you didn't think about that, did you? You just went crying rape and everyone thought *poor little Sheenie girl.*" The spread fingers of his right hand are like iron rods pushing into your chest, pushing you back, down the back alley. "But you and I know that's all bullshit." Push. "Bullshit." Push. "Bullshit!" Push. "It's only rape when you don't *want* it, and you wanted it, didn't you? Giving us the come-on all night, all *night*, you wanted it all right, Sheenie cocktease, and you *got* it, you got the best fuck you ever had, a fuck like you people can only ever dream of because it's with a real *man* and not some dickless Sheenie faggot. Admit it, you couldn't get enough of it; well, now you know what Earth men are like, real men. I get it! I get it, why you went to the cops! You were *jealous,* that's it, because it was a fuck like you could only dream of, and it took an Earth man to let you have it. Well, thank *you*, Ma'am. I am greatly honored."

A wedge of light from the open door.

"Hey, Doia, you all right? Doia, this man bothering you? Hey, you, leave her alone! Go on, get out of here, leave her alone. . . ."

He freezes an instant in the light from the door, and your chemical, pheromonal suspicions are confirmed. Then he shoves past you and is out the other end of the alley. Carlo and Paul give chase. A car door slams, an engine revs.

"Sorry, Doia. Bastard. That was one of them, wasn't it? Well, he won't get away. Got his car number, didn't we? Bastard!"

RETROSPECTIVE 3

World events in 1798 were of too epochal a turn for any one eye to be turned long enough on the heavens to register the arrival in Earth orbit of the unmanned Shi'an Interstellar Probe, the name of which translates roughly as *Exaltation of Larks.* Those seismic and meteorological disturbances which heralded its advent were seen to be the rumbles of divine displeasure at Regicide France by a civilization that was barely getting

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to metaphysical grips with the Newtonian universe, let alone comprehending the principles of the Mach drive. In the eighteen months of its visit, *Exaltation of Larks* masered comprehensive geophysical, environmental, ecological, and climatological data back to a five-thousand kilometer array of receptors stationed in the Shi'an system's cometary cloud. Oddly, the probe neglected to report the presence of indigenous sentients. None of the five hundred and sixteen star systems hitherto investigated by the Shi'an Interstellar Fleet had possessed native civilizations. Believing themselves alone in the universe, the Shi'an no longer bothered to look. Atmospheric concentrations of methane, the hallmark of agriculture, were taken to be the flatulence of large semi-aquatic herbivores similar to those found infesting the oceans of the second planet of 36 Ophiuchi. Only one human astronomer observed *Exaltation of Larks*: a Chinese mathematician who witnessed the probe's departure under Mach drive for the Epsilon Eridani star system and reported to the provincial governor that a brief "broom star" had crossed the heavens, an omen of change and turmoil in the affairs of men, later confirmed by earthquakes, strange lights in the sky, and the worst drought in two hundred and fifty years.

CHAPTER 3

Lyndon Badou: always: puts his left shoe on first,
works *much* better on sunny days,
has lucky things happen on Tuesdays,
has an onion-seed/cream-cheese bagel before Big Cases.

The best superstitions are the ones we write for ourselves.

Lyndon Badou: has: never had a good experience in an Indonesian restaurant. Meaning: when his Toyota flags him that the defendants' counsels want to meet him in the Rasa Sayang off Leicester Square, Lyndon Badou knows that he is going to get shafted. He leaves the Landcruiser on a double-yellow line, system up and purring, and orders the El Magnifico *rijstafel* with a liter of Evian.

"We want to deal, Mr. Badou."

"No deals. No plea bargains. I've got a prima facie case, court time booked tomorrow 03:15, and one of them threatened my client. Tell you what, I'll name the terms, you agree to them." (Leaving the sweet-sour hardboiled egg, because last time it gave him Hard Stomach Syndrome for a week.)

Facing him: Zavv; a Third-gen Ugandan Asian punk from South London way. They've met five times before. Score is five-love Badou.

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Paul-Michael Fanshawe. A five-hundred-note crease on his pants, but he's on the downside of the hill.

Joey Garcia, Sr. Goes way back, to the days of *wigs,* and *gowns,* and *juries.*

AyJay Maltman-Singh. A nodding respect. After all, they were the same year at the Law Faculty.

And. . . .

"Mr. Peter Carnassi will speak for us all."

Killer. From the Masonic cufflinks in his Roland Jaques shirt to the gold ferrule of his black malacca cane. Fred Astaire with *shuriken* under his top hat.

If you once, *once,* let them smell your fear, the pack will tear you apart.

"So, Mr. Carnassi?"

"On our collective advice, our clients are willing to plead guilty to the charge of assault occasioning actual bodily harm."

"A year, eighteen months suspended, tops? I'm sure they're willing, Mr. Carnassi. But they're going down for rape."

"I don't think so, Mr. Badou. Mr. Zavadi?"

They're smiling like synchronized swimmers. Lyndon Badou suspects this is going to be harder to stomach than sweet-sour eggs.

"Our clients do not deny that an assault took place." Bastard Zavv looks like this one stroke will even the score to five-all. "Likewise, they do not deny that they had intercourse with your client, but they flatly deny the charge of rape. The date of the alleged offense was September 28, which falls within the Shi'an autumn sexual cycle. Forensic evidence indicates that your client was in estrus at that time, and thus emitting pheromonal signals to attract a partner. It is a well-established fact, Mr. Badou, that Shi'an and human biochemistries are close enough for human males to be affected—aroused—by Shi'an female pheromones."

Fuck it. He can't deny what he himself has experienced, that heady, musky, sultry perfume of Shi'an town.

"Our clients have testified that it was your client's pheromonal emissions that excited them into a state of sexual arousal," says the smooth bastard Carnassi. "Indeed, we intend to argue, first, that such blatant sexual signals imply desire for sex, and thus some degree of consent, and, second, that our clients' judgments were sufficiently affected by the neurochemicals that they cannot be considered responsible for their actions." Mr. Peter Carnassi's smile is like a silken hangman's-rope.

"We can cite academic authorities," says Zavv. "We're more than willing to supply you with the database references."

"How far did you have to stick your head up Mr. Peter Carnassi's ass to learn to talk like that, Zavv?" asks Lyndon Badou, surrounded and outflanked by the twenty-six dishes of his El Magnifico *rijstafel.* But

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he's beaten, beaten hard, and hates it. Even in liberal/tolerant/grass-smoking Holland, they'll hack him apart in the software wars.

"So, Mr. Badou, in your professional opinion?"

In Mr. Badou's professional opinion, he might as well drop his pants, clear a space among the twenty-six dishes, bend over, and invite them to take turns. Indonesian restaurants!

COURT CIRCULAR

From: Den Haag Central Criminal Court: Royal Dutch Justice Ministry Administration and Data Processing.

To: Advocate L. Badou. Lawyer No. 03268423/lb/gb/17.

Hearing: 26/7/G15: Crown (qv) v. Miller, Snipes, Bodansky, Montgomery, and Kinz.

Time: 5/10/2008 03:17

Charge: Assault Occasioning etc. to person of Mz. Doia Ti'Rerr-ereme'Atht.*

Plea: Guilty.

Judgment: Defendants Miller, Snipes, Bodansky, Montgomery, and Kinz fined Dfl 500, two months electronic tagged curfew.

Refs/Sources/Judgment database:

Inner Temple Law Lib.

LawFac.

Crown Prosecution Database.

King's Inns InterSeve MacroBase.

MicroSoft: *Minerva*, update 16/2007 late.

c.c.: Advocates Zavadi, Fanshawe, Garcia, Maltman-Singh, Carnassi.

*translation appended.

PRIME TIME

The Canary Wharf area is once again quiet in the wake of police moving in overnight to quell disturbances among the Shi'an immigrant community following the dropping of allegations of rape against five members of a local sports club. Unrest has been reported among Shi'an communities in Birmingham's Handsworth district, Manchester Longsight, and Glasgow Hillhead, while in Paris, Hamburg, and Munich demonstrations by the Shi'an have provoked violent attacks by gangs of armed neo-Nazi groups. Prosecuting Counsel Mr. Lyndon Badou was today unavailable for comment, but Shi'an community leaders worldwide

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have decried the plea-bargain as proof of institutionalized discrimination against the Traveler population. Tension is still high in Shi'an settlements in Europe and the United States; for a second night, police have been placed on general alert.

THE VICTIM

The twins have been excited all day but you have no spirit for the night's dancing. The men have been drifting in their ones and twos to the dancefloor since dusk, laughing, smiling, flashing challenges to one another, costumes shedding rainwater. Output LEDs on CD boomboxes flicker: soundchecks; the men stretch and limber and check their gear. Marann is nervous, aroused already, shuffling from foot to foot as she watches over the prefab half-door, half-dancing. You can see her allure as an almost visible coil of pheromones.

"That's him! There, see him? Isn't he beautiful? I'm going to have him; tonight. I'm going to dance with him. He'll be in my bed tomorrow morning."

And now you wait at the bus stop with the dancefloor a distant puddle of floodlight and music. The people on the D9 bus stare at you as you find an unoccupied seat at the back. You watch the rain freckle the windows, the luminous blur of the city beyond. Nestled in your sweat-top pouch, your fingers turn the clever little gadget over and over and over.

It takes three changes of bus to get there, and on none of them will anyone sit within three rows of you. The bastard-Italianate apartment blocks in terracotta and cream brick, the white curves of yachts in the rain-pocked marina—sails furled for another season—are yet another alien world. The apartment is easily found, the electronic keycode easily dazzled with the confuser in your pocket. Lights wake to your body heat. Small. So small. But then, he says he lives in his car.

You lose the hours until his return in memories of seventy years back, before they switched off your consciousness, slipped you into a stasis pod in a lander-module clinging to the skeleton of a starship you never saw, and woke you up around another star.

"What the *fuck?*" He has a *woman* with him, a black woman. Handsome, you suppose, but fucking something so utterly different seems to you like fucking an animal. You hold up the confuser.

"You owe me, Mr. Badou."

"I? Owe *you?* Babe, I barely made enough from the deal to cover my expenses!"

"You owe me, Mr. Badou." The black woman pours an alcohol, looks

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disdainful. Raindrops slide down the window pane. "Not money. Everything's money for you people, isn't it? You owe me justice. With us, advocate and client have a relationship; the advocate takes on a promise to seek justice however long it takes, whatever the cost. All their lives, sometimes. You owe me justice, and you owe me a voice. In our law, the victim has the right to name her victimizers, she has a right to speak. You never did that, Mr. Badou. You never let me speak. You did all my speaking for me, put all the words in my mouth. You never asked me if I wanted to reduce the charges. You betrayed me. You betrayed justice."

"Doia. . . ."

The space between the bed and the window is just big enough. You raise your arms above your head, ripple-click fingers, bend, turn, step in time to the clicking. Bend, turn, step, click. *Smile.*

"Come on, Mr. Badou. Come on. You've studied us, you know what a Shi'an is." Bend, turn, step, click. "But you can't, can you? None of you can. Can't dance. Can't *feel.* Come on, Mr. Badou. Dance with me. Dance. Dance!"

"For fuck's sake, Lyndon!" screams the woman. "Get this crazy bitch out of here!"

PSYCHOLOGY TEST

Circle the response on the scale you think best summarizes your judgment of the victim's part in the following situations.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Totally blameless			Partly to blame			Mostly to blame			Totally responsible

Situation 1: A middle-aged woman is walking home from work. It is five o'clock in the afternoon, bright daylight. A car draws alongside, two men get out, drag her in, take her to a deserted spot, and rape her.

Situation 2: A woman is walking home alone after leaving a nightclub where she has been drinking with some friends. It is three o'clock in the morning, dark, and in a bad neighborhood. She is attacked and raped by a single man with a knife.

Situation 3: A young woman has been drinking in a bar for some hours. She has been flirting and dancing with several men, and behaving in a generally relaxed, uninhibited manner. The men are drunk. Six of them take her to a back room and gang-rape her.

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Supplemental: What factors influenced your decision, why, and do you feel they are justified?

CHAPTER FOUR

It takes Lydon Badou half an hour circling in the Landcruiser to find a parking space within comfortable distance of the Italian diner in Camden Town where, his car informs him, Dohanye, the Shi'an lawyer takes his lunchbreaks from the T.V. production company that employs him as a researcher. Faded photomurals of Lake Como. Floridly framed still-lifes of mandolins and dusty pomegranates. Gingham-patterned fablon table-covering, unpeeling at the corners, menus in wipe-kleen slip-plastic stands.

"Mr. Badou."

"Mr. Dohanye."

"Join me? I can recommend the pasta." A pseudo-Delft Windsor-Castle-printed plateful of *farfalle con pesto* is set down. Lyndon Badou waves away an Italian grandmother (pre-EC) with poised notebook and pencil.

"The Shi'an law."

"Yes?" (Generous with the salt.)

"How does it work?"

"You mean, how does it achieve consistent justice? The basic principle of Shi'an law is Personal Right. One does not offend against the Law. One offends against a person's rights."

"Therefore, would I be correct in assuming that under Shi'an law, cases are not tried as to specific charges, as is the case with our law, but as infringements of basic hu . . . Shi'an . . . rights?"

"You would, Mr. Badou."

"I'm going to move for a retrial. Under our law, there is a principle of *best defense,* that the lawyer must defend his client to the best of his abilities, and I failed to do that. I failed Doia. I failed my own ethics. I know you may find it hard to believe that I have ethics, morals. I failed because somewhere—this is not easy to say—there is a part of me that does not believe the Shi'an are fully human, and thus do not warrant the full protection of human law. I'm sorry. Call me a racist black bastard. But now I'm going to get this tried as a case of rape, and convicted as a case of rape."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, Mr. Badou, but under your law a man may not be tried twice on the same charge."

"That's why I asked you to confirm certain points of Shi'an law. Under your law, there are no specific charges, only generalized violations of fundamental rights. I'm going to hit those bastards with a civil suit and

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try this in a Shi'an court, under Shi'an law. I've enough precedent to stop them from wriggling out: Navajo Nation versus Roland Maria Ortega, 2002; Rev. Irene Templeton v. The Church of England Archdiocese of York, 1996; both cases where local law—Navajo, Church Canon—were deemed to hold precedence over statute law."

Dohanye raises a finger to summon coffees. ("Bit of an acquired taste with us, Mr. Badou.")

"I will assist you in every way possible, Mr. Badou. The opposition's biochemical argument will be difficult to counter; however, there is an argument, a solid biochemical fact, that will shatter it. There are things about us that we have chosen not to disclose until it is to our best advantage to do so, information stored in the Shi'an shipboard colonial library. The human idea of the Trump Card is a powerful Shi'an symbol."

"Wait wait wait wait, what do you mean, *assist?*" asks Lyndon Badou in consternation.

"Ah. There seems to be something of a misunderstanding here," says skin-smooth Dohanye. "You had assumed that as a practitioner of the Shi'an law, I would be best qualified to represent Doia in the live, real-time environment of the Shi'an court. Unfortunately, there is a certain . . . declared interest? that prevents me. I am the father of Doia's children."

Big Mama fustle-bustles with *cappucinos*, and Lyndon Badou feels the world come apart in his stomach.

"Under the principle of Best Defense, *you* should be the one to represent your own client," says Dohanye, amply sugaring his coffee. "No one else knows case and client as intimately."

"Live." (Thinking: *he's punishing me for being a racist bastard.)*

"We are a slow people, we prefer the justice of the community to the justice of high-speed database submissions and judicial expert software. The Shi'an law is not a jealous law like yours, it does not stand above the community demanding authority and respect, but is a *member* of the community. Anyone may practice Shi'an law. Healthy disrespect is positively encouraged."

"You think I can give the best defense in a court where I don't even know the procedures, let alone the law?" (Thinking: *It's Lyndon Badou who is on trial here, for his entire race.*)

"Our law does not demand absolute truth beyond reasonable doubt, as yours does. We work on persuasive strength tipping the balance of probabilities. With a jury of one hundred and fifty, the balance comes out right. Your role is to persuade, all you need do is present your case factually, forthrightly and eloquently. The people will decide."

"Fuck," says Lyndon Badou.

"Like your bill now?" says Big Mama Napolina.

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POINT OF LAW

While Senator Joe McCarthy wheels out the judicial witchprickers and ducking stool and shows the hot irons to the Hollywood Screen Writers' Guild, Klaatu and Gort and Mu-tant *et al* whiz down in a Flying Saucer and land on the White House lawn. Marines tanks artillery navy airforce surround the place. Mr. President awaits to greet the visitors. The entrance ramp descends. Hushed silence all over the world. Out comes Klaatu Gort Mu-tant *et al.*

"Greeting, Earthmen. We come in . . . "

He never gets to finish it. A single steel-jacketed high-velocity round takes Klaatu through the forehead, leaving most of his brains on the chrome-steel finish of his You Eff Owe. Mr. Willard Jackman—nutcase—has shot him with an Army Surplus rifle from the top of the Washington Monument.

Q: Is Mr. Willard Jackman guilty of murder?

A: Mr. Willard Jackman walks.

Klaatu is an *alien,* and an alien is not human, and so cannot be murdered. The most Mr. Willard Jackman is guilty of is discharging a firearm in the presence of the president. Even dogs cats bald eagles raccoons bats and several species of rainforest trees have more right to life than Klaatu. What the law doesn't recognize, the law cannot protect.

Which is why the first task of the resurrected crew of the 15th Shi'an Fleet, on establishing communications with this suddenly, shockingly, unprecedentedly *inhabited, industrialized, space-faring* colony world, was to negotiate themselves human—or, at least, sentient—status under U.N. and national laws. Even that wasn't total; in the State of Alabama, they're still classified as animals.

It only cost them eight thousand years of science and technology.

Who ever said rights were unalienable?

Who ever said law was cheap?

CHAPTER FIVE

Louis Armstrong.

They're playing Louis Fucking *Arm*strong; Wonderful Fucking World. The colored light bulbs are all connected up, they're testing the floods, and now they're playing *music.* It's a circus out there. Lyndon Badou paces turn two three turn two three turn two three in the cramped dimensions of the caravan, looks out the window at the crowd gathering with the dusk.

There must be close on a thousand, not counting the media boys. Hands

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wet, mouth dry, bladder thumping against prostate, and all there are are fucking *aspirins*.

White floodlights empty into the circle of the dancefloor. The Sorority banners rattle in the rising wind, stray drops of rain smear the caravan window. The black stones and the white stones have been delivered by courier to the hundred and fifty jurors selected at random from the Electoral Rolls. The people are gathered. In a similar caravan across the dancecourt, his opponents are likewise preparing themselves, and *they're* playing fucking *Louis Armstrong*.

He is Rocky before the Big Fight.

He is Prince before the Big Gig.

He is John Wayne about to hit the beach on Iwo Jima.

The music has stopped.

"Ready?" asks Dohanye; coach/manager/beloved sergeant major who'd do *anything* for his grunts. Lyndon Badou nods, then realizes that Dohanye will not understand the gesture. A shrug. *You're sixty light-years from home now.*

The court is an empty circle of light. *Our courts turn inward, an arena for adversaries to battle. These people, who dance out their aggression, turn outward, to reach out, to perform, to persuade.*

Across the dancefloor, the defendants and their defenders are waiting. Separated by fifty meters of scabby concrete, this is the first time Lyndon Badou has seen the five men together, in the flesh. He is afraid of their *fleshness*, their corporeality. Down on the dancefloor, the hot white light reveals that they are not fleshless, bloodless, nervous quanta of data to be shuffled by software sophistry, but solid beings, solid lives. The responsibility is awesome.

Lyndon Badou falters.

Doia steps into the center of the ring.

"I name and recognize these people as the violators of my rights and selfhood," she declares, with a courage that Lyndon Badou knows he could not match were he in her position. Her breath steams in the late October air. "And I call upon these persons here present to so witness and be my judge." She places a black stone at the center of the ring and withdraws. In a ritual older than all recorded human history, each of the five accused comes to the center and places a white stone beside the single black. Here is no judge, no law of precedent, no formalities of rite and ritual; here are only people. Vertiginous with freedom, Lyndon Badou walks into the center of the circle, picks up the black stone in his hand, and speaks into the white light.

"We say that no one has ever invented a new sin. All our sins and evils have always been with us. But you are called here tonight to witness a rare and terrible thing: the birth of a new sin. You'll say that the sin of

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rape is no new thing—indeed, it is probably one of the oldest human sins—but I will show you that it was a new and terrible violation not just of my client, but of her entire people. The rape of one woman is appalling, the rape of eight million Shi'an a crime beyond comprehension."

THE VERDICT

The rain has come again—you sense that it has never gone away, that, for you, your children, your Sorority, your people, it never will go away now—scoring sharp diagonals across the white cylinder of light falling into the dancecourt. It is late, it is cold, the rain is cruel, but the people wait. The people listen.

Their lawyer was very good, the old one, he has spoken with the assurance of one accustomed to finding justice with words. So good he had placed a chill in your heart; perhaps it had not been as you remembered it, perhaps they had not taken you into that equipment store when everyone else had gone, piled mats on top of you, and fucked you and fucked you and fucked you and fucked you and fucked you. The way they *look* at you, the *men,* like they would do it again if they only could, like they would do it to you forever.

Then you had stood with the one black and five white stones at your feet, with the wind and the edge of the rain tearing at you, and you had told it: every word, every deed, and you had not noticed the cold and the wet and the rain because a heat burned inside you, like the heat of dancing but purer, hotter, stronger, a heat that made the people listen to your words, that held them, and Marann and Maia and your Sorority sisters and even Dohanye were clenching their fists and baring their teeth: *yes.*

And the smooth old human had stood up and torn it apart with his eloquence, and made you into a dirty *animal* ruled by the heats and lusts of rut, and the tearing of it was like the way they had torn the heart out of you in the mat room. Sensing your pain, Lyndon Badou had touched your hand, shyly, uncertainly, and whispered, *Trust me.*

Now he stands with the stones of guilt and innocence at his feet, and though he does not have the deadly eloquence of Garcia, he has the sound, the *smell* of truth.

"Mr. Garcia, in portraying his clients as the victims of some supposed sinister Shi'an sexual witchcraft, not only does my client and her people a gross and racist insult, he is guilty of not being in full possession of the scientific facts. His claim that my client's knowledge that she was in sexual season and transmitting pheromonal signals implies consent must

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be rejected. We do not dispute the opposition's biochemical evidence, but that notwithstanding, my client could not possibly have consented. Not possibly. She could not have consented because, among the Shi'an, intercourse without consent is impossible. Quite impossible.

"The Shi'an sexual cycle is twofold. Like ours, there is the public, and there is the intimate. The primary, public phase occurs when changes in daylight trigger estrus, which is communicated pheromonally—the Shi'an present will not be offended when I observe that the humans here must be aware of a certain . . . frisson, a *tingle* in the air. The secondary, intimate phase occurs after partners have been selected and during foreplay. At this stage, by a conscious process, the female secretes a second pheromone."

The rain punishes Docklands, but the lawyer has the people by their ears.

"This pheromone, this chemical, is a neurochemical key that completes a hormone in the male which enables him to achieve erection and ejaculation. Only in the presence of this transmitter pheromone, this consent chemical is erection, and thus penetration, and thus intercourse, possible. The male cannot manufacture it for himself; without it, intercourse is impossible."

The hundred and fifty just persons, the assembled media and spectators, mumble, mutter oceanically in surprise. Garcia levels an accusing finger at Lyndon Badou. Clouds move low and fast, tear on the pinnacles of the big, empty towers.

"This information was not privy to us. Cite your sources, Mr. Badou!"

Lyndon Badou returns the accusatory finger, snaps it up to point at heaven.

"The information is readily available in the central bioscience library aboard the Shi'an colony ships. All it requires is a satellite uplink, which I'm sure is not beyond your resources, gentlemen.

"The truth is that Shi'an society is one in which sex is *always* by female consent. Seduction is possible, all the trimmings we feel are necessary for romantic love are possible, but *not* unconsenting intercourse. Not rape. Not the male lust for dominance that is the motivation of so much rape. Not violence against women. None of this. I was told by a member of my client's Sorority that Shi'an men love their women. Think on that, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, think on it long and hard. The Shi'an are a race of how many billions, trillions? scattered across ten worlds, including our own, without any knowledge, any conception, any *capacity* for this most ancient of evils.

"And thus the crime of these five men is infinitely greater than rape of this Shi'an woman—monstrous though that is. They are guilty of the

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rape of the Shi'an *race*. They have invented a new sin. And, like Pandora's box, once a new sin is loose in the world, it cannot be hidden away again. Your task, your duty, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, is to find these five men guilty of raping Doia, and of raping every last member of her people. That is the magnitude of the crime. That is the measure of their guilt. Thank you."

He turns, he blinks, long and slow, a Shi'an smile, and walks back to leave the dancecourt an empty disc of light. In the end, he was worthy of your trust, this *man*. Silence. One by one the jurors come out of the encircling crowd to place one stone, black or white, on the pile in the center of the dancefloor. And suddenly, you cannot watch. You cannot bear to hear the verdict. You turn and push away through the crowd. Dohanye calls to you in Shi'an, you nod *no*. He understands. You walk along the dockside until the dancefloor is a distant circle of light and sound in the greater darkness of the city. You look at the patterns the DLR pylons cut against the dirty yellow clouds, and study the impact of rain in the dark waters of the dock for signs and symbols. The tiny, solitary voice of the human lawyer, Lyndon Badou, speaks into the hush. The wind buffets his words, hands you fragments . . . *jury of your peers having found you guilty . . . sentencing in Central Criminal Court . . . reparations to the injured party*. . . . Words that are supposed to make everything right, everything just, but cannot because they remain, always, only words. Justice does not make it right. Badou was indeed to be trusted when he said that once loose in the world, it cannot be put back again. Not by words. Not by law.

After silence, voices. Tumult. They are calling for you, calling your name; the newspersons, the television reporters. You will have to go, you suppose. But later. Not now. For now you think you might watch the rain falling into the dark water of the dock and being swallowed a while longer. You never realized how beautiful falling rain could be. ●

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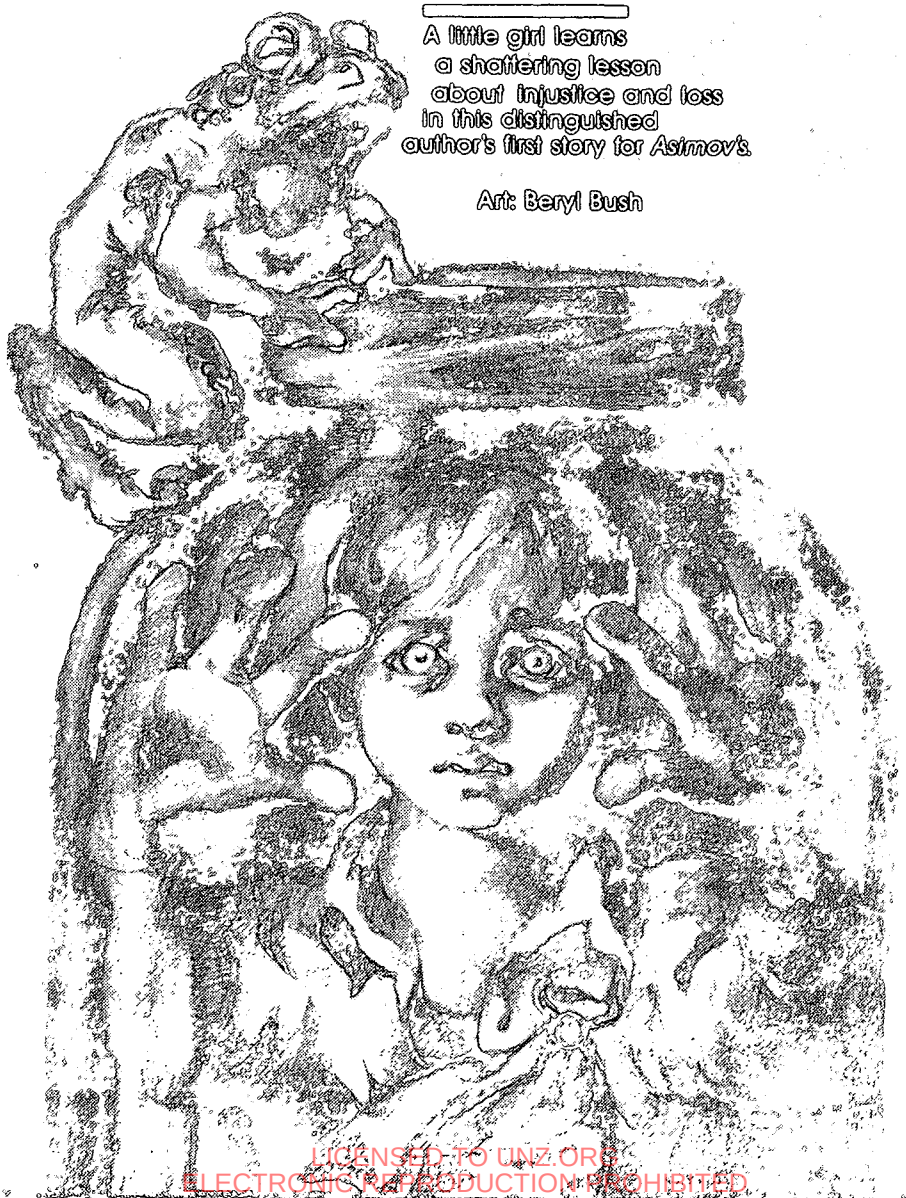
THE TOAD WITCH

Jessica Amanda Salmonson

A little girl learns a shattering lesson about injustice and loss in this distinguished author's first story for *Asimov's*.

Art: Beryl Bush



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I began life in 1950. Until then, everything was darkness. Afterward was suffering and beauty. How could I not become a masochist? By the age of four I had learned to mistrust everyone, a good philosophy. If one expects something terrible to develop out of even pleasant events, one may also expect consolations at moments of travail; and even I must delude myself from time to time, succumbing to the disease of sentiment.

People who are essentially cheerful annoy me. When they are finally bent and deaf, they are suddenly surprised. They find out their lives were pointless falsehoods; that it's all nearly over, and for what? When in the end they are completely disillusioned they seek forgiveness from everyone, for they had always been oblivious to the obvious things, to the suffering around them. They are sorry for having insisted nothing was ever all that bad. Destined as they are to so much disappointment, they merit our sadness more than our disdain.

As for those of us daily anguished, we need not be pitied. The world constantly reinforces our perspective. We may nod our heads like true sages. We are impervious to disillusion, knowing as we do that worse is yet to come.

The street on which I lived as a girl was off a rural highway in western Washington. It was a dead-end street, unpaved and dusty in summer, muddy in fall. Ditches carried run-off to the end of that street, from whence the dirty water made its own route through a swamp littered by illegal dumping.

In that dark and muddy wood were two cottages. One was abandoned with the roof fallen in. I never knew who must once have lived there. Whoever it had been was long forgotten, having vanished without the least impact upon our little community of poor white trash.

The other house was a ramshackle affair surrounded by stinging nettles. An old woman lived there with a dog. Because of the nettles, we children almost never went near. I remember it being miles and miles into the forest. But it couldn't possibly have been so far or so wild as it seemed to me as a child.

The area was dangerous on account of the swamp. Children were strictly warned against playing there. Whenever we were inclined to disobey, we invariably paid with welts from briars and nettles.

We children of that back-road community devised our own mythology about the swamps, which included the sure knowledge of bottomless pools in which many a hapless child had drowned in past generations. Our own uncles and cousins, we supposed, whom we had never known, were bones in the deep black waters. Adults whispered about it when children were put to bed, for many terrible secrets, we were certain, were kept hidden by parents.

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We also knew an old witch lived back there amidst the mud, litter and stickers—a witch and her skinny, weird dog.

Some one of us invented a story about children being turned into toads. We all came to believe it. Whenever someone caught a toad and put it in a jar, we would gather around and look at it with worried faces, wondering what child it once had been, fearful that a day would come when the old witch would cast a spell on one of us.

That same summer my brother became sick and died. He was three years older than I. I loved him a lot. Sometimes he was wicked to me, but mostly he was protective and nice. It made me bossy to other children. I never had to threaten them with my brother, because they very well knew that I could make him do anything I wanted him to do.

The night when he was dying, he had a fever and raved about toads and witches. To me he had always seemed so much older and wiser, yet he was only a child like me. He may have been the one who made up that story about toads, but even knowing it originated in his own imagination, he believed it. And his last night on Earth was filled with terror about the swamp.

I was in bed a room away, my head under the covers, tears streaming down my cheeks, biting my lower lip, listening to him rave about the witch and her assembly of toads. When he stopped raving, I heard him moaning and struggling for breath.

The doctor came. He spoke harshly to my parents. "Why didn't you call me earlier?" He hadn't been called because our family was so poor. I got out of bed in my nightgown and crept down the hall. "We daren't move him now," said the doctor. He and my parents built a tent over my brother, using a spare sheet with brooms and mops tied together to hold the sheet up. They started a steamer filling the tent with mist while my brother raved anew that he was trapped in a seedpod by the witch. I was whisked back to bed by my mother and told not to get up.

I finally fell asleep when my brother became silent. The last thing I remember of that night was my mother's muted weeping.

Later I blocked the funeral from my mind. I didn't believe the inert boy in the box was my brother. I believed the witch had turned him into a toad. There had to be some way to turn him back, if I could find him. So wholeheartedly did I think that this was true that even today, when I am a middle-aged woman who believes in nothing at all, I still wonder from time to time if my brother is alive in some swamp, for toads live such long lives.

From time to time I looked for him. This brought me into contact with the witch. I would put on a sweater even if it was a hot day, to protect my arms from nettles. Skirting the puddles and getting thick mud on

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my shoes, I often looked for the toad that was my brother. There were plenty of frogs, but toads were harder to find.

Once I saw her dog inside the cottage with its paws against the smudgy window, its blind eyes staring and staring, seeming to see something directly behind me. Another time I saw the witch gathering up sticks and taking them in her house for kindling. She and her dog were very troubling to me. They appeared in my most terrible dreams, standing outside my house in a storm.

From a vantage-point amidst the bushes, I peered at the rickety house, around which were strewn hundreds of old tin cans and broken jars and sundry refuse. A broken rabbit hutch lay on its side. Old grey lumber was poorly stacked at the side of the house, most of it gone to rot. The witch came running out with her dog and screamed at me, "Get away from there, scat! Scat or I'll set my dog on you!" The dog couldn't see a thing and had no teeth and woofed feebly, but to me, out there at the edge of the known world, it sounded like a monster.

I had a friend named Angeline. I told her about the monster dog with no teeth but a big slavering wormy mouth like a mudpuppy that had crawled out of the muck. We shivered with fright.

"Did you see where she keeps your brother?" asked Angeline.

"I couldn't get close enough. There are cans and jars all around her house. I'm sure she keeps him in a jar."

Angeline nodded agreement.

She and I were in the second grade. She was a tomboy like me. Even in a flaring print dress, she could climb a tree as fast as a squirrel. Sometimes we would climb a tree together. If any boys tried to come up after us, we took off our underpants and put our feet on two branches to pee down on them. It made the boys run off. They made up a song about us, "Angeline and Rosemary sitting in a tree! Kissing in a tree! Pissing in a tree!" They'd throw clumps of clay at us, exploding into smoky dust.

They never could make us cry. I think that's why the boys hated us. If we would only cry now and then, it would be all right. But we wouldn't. I hated them and remembered my brother, who would fix them good if I could only find him and get him changed back into himself.

I hadn't cried since the night my brother was so ill. I had somehow lost the ability. Angeline always imitated me. If she ever cried, she did it when I wasn't around, so I wouldn't know. The sound of crying was something that pulled at my heart in a way I didn't like. At the funeral, everyone had cried except me, for only I understood that my brother wasn't really dead, and therefore I had nothing to cry about. Somewhere inside me, I suppose I knew that tears meant acknowledgment. I had not acknowledged the possibility that I would never see my brother again.

One day Angeline came to the back door and asked my mother if I was

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home. There was something very conspiratorial about the way she was acting. We went behind an old barn and Angeline said, "Look, I found something."

From out of her skirt pocket she took a big, fat, bumpy toad.

"It has blue eyes," said Angeline.

It was true. They were the color of my brother's eyes.

"You've found him," I whispered, cupping him tenderly in my hands.

"How can we change him back?" asked Angeline.

"I don't know."

That night I kept him in a box beside my bed and woke up many times, checking to see that he was all right. When I looked into his toad face, it seemed to me that he was smiling impishly, in the manner of my brother.

I kept him hidden in my room and spent a lot of time catching flies from the windows of the house, ripping off one wing from each, then dropping them in the box tucked in the back of my closet. It was funny to think of my brother eating bugs and flies, but he wasn't interested in anything else I showed him.

It was the middle of summer, no school. There hadn't been much rain for weeks so the swamp was pretty dry. Angeline and I met at the end of the street, where a barbed wire fence and a warning sign blocked the way. We climbed through the fence and squatted where no one would see us. I had my brother with me and opened the cookie can for Angeline to see.

"What'll we do?" asked Angeline.

"There's only one way to stop her magic," I said. I handed her a crinkled brown paper bag. She opened the bag and saw a can of lighter fluid and the matches.

"We have to burn her," I said.

Angeline's brown eyes stared wide. "Yeah?"

"That's right."

"Are matches enough?"

"That lighter fluid can squirt real far. You run up to her and start squirting it all over her dress and dodging from side to side so she can't get you. Then I'll run up behind and throw matches on her. Witches are made out of wood. She'll go up like an old sappy stick."

"Wow," said Angeline.

We started through the woods toward the old woman's shack.

We skulked around the periphery of her cluttered, stickery property until we realized she wasn't home. It had never occurred to either of us that the old witch actually *went* anywhere, for we had never seen her out walking, never knew how she might get to a store for things she

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needed. After a few minutes we became bold and strode toward her house, accidentally scaring an old chicken from its hiding place. Its sudden appearance and its squawk gave us a fright, but our mission was too important, and we could not turn back with my brother unrestored.

"Watch out for her dog," I whispered.

But the dog had apparently gone with the witch on some errand. We tried the front door and of course it wasn't locked. When I was little, almost nobody even had a lock unless they were crazies afraid someone would see what awful messes they lived in, and even they more often sealed up their doors with twisty old pieces of wire. So we went right into the witch's house.

I was surprised to see it was all rather orderly, though hardly pleasant. It smelled like an old dog—or an old woman. In her kitchen I saw a row of large dark bottles. By now my heart was tight with a sort of confused anger, and, frustrated because there was no witch to burn, I knocked several of her jars off their shelf, just to be spiteful and make a mess. The jars broke on the floor, spilling dried beans and lumpy flour.

Angeline squealed with a shocked delight, and, seeing a beautiful, fragile blue tea-cup on the table, she knocked it flying with a sweep of her hand. It shattered against a drawer.

I opened cannisters of crusty, hardened, strange-smelling spices and dumped them on the floor. "She probably uses these old spices in her spells," I said. On her wood-burning stove was an old iron pot, too small to be a witch's cauldron, even though it looked like one to me. A big spider ran across the counter, and Angeline gave a shrill cry on seeing it.

"If that big ol' spider bites you," I said, "you'll turn into a toad just like my brother."

She tried to find something to smash the spider, but it disappeared down a crack.

The witch's bedroom made me especially uneasy, but for reasons I hadn't expected. Against the faded wallpaper were hung framed metallic photographs so dark that the sharp-eyed people in them looked like shadows standing in darkness. The portraits were daguerreotypes, but I'd never seen one before, and I didn't know what to make of them. My first thought was that they were the perfect kind of photographs for witches, all dark and spooky. But the thing that really made me uneasy was the realization that the old witch had once had a family, that these must be photographs of her grandparents or great-grandparents, that she hadn't been conjured out of a hellish place, that she might be human after all and once might have been a child like me.

A portrait of a young woman standing beside a soldier was propped up

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on the cluttered dressing table. The woman wore a long, flounced white dress. The soldier wore bloomers, a broad hat, and a serious expression.

Angeline was rifling through a chest of drawers. "Look at this!" she exclaimed, and opened a tattered parasol, memento of the witch's youth. It had once been white but was now yellow and moth-eaten. Angeline pranced about the little bedroom and leaped upon the bed, posing with the parasol. Then she batted it to pieces on the bedstead.

"Don't do that, Angy."

"Why not?" she said petulantly. Angeline always emulated me, was always trying to please me. At that moment it was intolerable to see into such a mirror, to see what I was like as Angy tried to one-up me destroying the witch's things. She opened the brown paper sack and took out the can of lighter fluid and started squirting it on the walls. "Let's burn down her house!" said Angy. "Let's do it now!"

Then we heard the sound of a truck's clutch and we grew scared and quiet. Angeline left the lighter fluid can on the bed and hopped down to stand by me. She followed me tip-toed to the cracked, sooty front room window. Out on the rarely used driveway, a beat-up truck was bouncing toward the house. A large, ugly man was driving. I had never seen him before; he may have lived in the community the other side of the swamps. The witch was with him. When he stopped the truck, he got out and went around to help her down. He was chattering at her in a repulsively cheerful manner, saying, "It's not that big a tragedy, Mrs. Osiris. Why, I can get you a healthy little puppy for free! It's just as well that old dog was put out of his misery; cruel to let him suffer."

"I'm all right," said the witch in a gruff, awful manner. "I'll be fine. Don't bring me no puppy. I don't want no other dog."

"Well I've got to get on home, Mrs. Osiris. I'll check in on you in a day or two if you like."

He got back in his truck and was soon gone, the clutch sounding in the distance. Angeline and I had slunk to the kitchen, intending to get away by the back door. But the witch had gone around to the side of the house and we could see her. She was standing motionless by the wood pile, her head hanging low.

"Shall we burn her?" asked Angeline, breathing excitedly. "Shall we do it now?"

I held the cookie can in front of me and pulled off the lid. The blue-eyed toad stared at me with such sad eyes, I almost thought it could hear me thinking. "Not now," I said. I sat the can on the table and took the toad out, holding it around the belly as its hind feet kicked and tried to find something to push against. "Not ever," I added.

"Why not? What about us getting your brother changed back?"

My shoe crunched on a little piece of blue glass. I was wishing I were

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a toad, or that I were dead instead of my brother. Tears were streaming down my face.

"What's wrong with you, Rosemary?"

Angeline looked scared, as though she thought my incomprehensible tears were caused by an evil spell. I drew myself together in a hurry and told her, "We've got to sneak out the front door and never come back here. We've got never to think of this place again, like it doesn't even exist. The witch's power was in that blue cup you broke. When she sees it, she's as good as dead. You ruined her forever when you shattered it."

We slipped away and Angeline, obedient to my commands, never went there again, never thought of it for all I know.

But I've often gone back, in my memory, where I can still see the toad-witch, without wanting to do so. I see her spindly, wood-kindling body going up in flame and my brother leaping from the cookie box a laughing little boy. Then I see him as a handsome young man in soldier's bloomers, courting a beautiful woman with a flashing white parasol and a collection of daguerreotypes. I see myself playing by a wood pile with a happy, bouncing dog and calling to my best beloved grandmother at her kitchen window. I see it in every permutation I can imagine but I can never get it to come out right. I can never make the world any better than it has ever been, or ever shall be. That's the brutal fact. ●

DIONYSUS DENDRITES

I see him only in bright dreams:
white face laughing, crouching in the crook
of an oak with thrashing leaves. It seems
he waits patiently, the years to him a blink, a look
(glancing; no haste for those hands that reach
for mine) to see if I have wakened since last we met.
Breathlessly I beg him, "Speak to me, teach
me the words that act as passkeys, the quiet
song that soothes the Dog; name the place where I
can cross the narrow river, enter the forest, climb
that tree to join you."

He laughs at the lie they taught me:
Of course I will cross that black water, in time.

And then I wake.
The leaves fade. The vivid eyes grow dim.
I pull the curtains fast against the dawn,
and turn to wait for him.

—Elizabeth Hand

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Jim Young

MICRODE CITY

Jim Young has been an American foreign service officer since the late '70s. He's worked "in and out of both Germanies, served in Botswana (where our embassy was located over a sporting goods store), and in Washington." After a year of Russian-language training,

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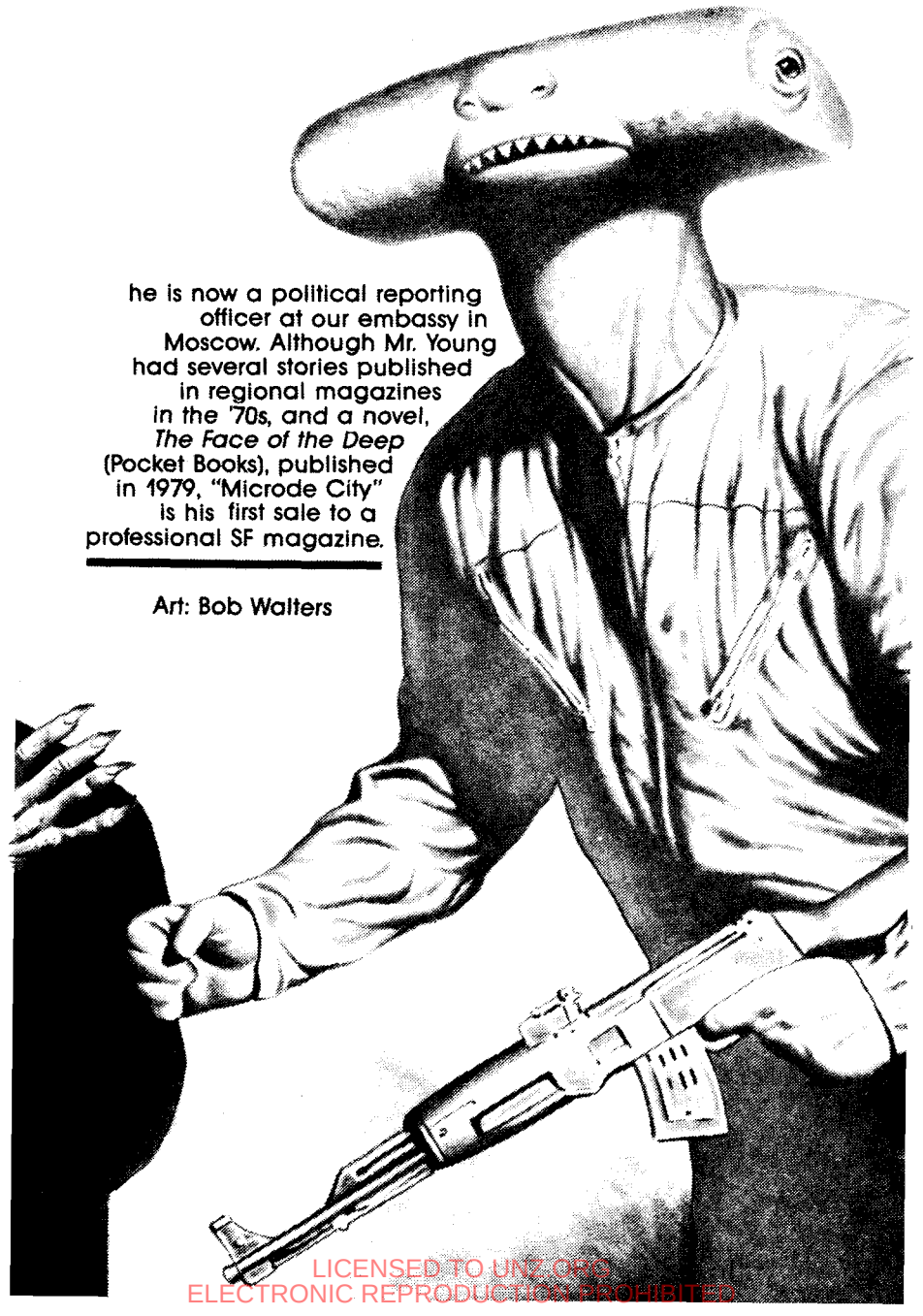
he is now a political reporting officer at our embassy in Moscow. Although Mr. Young had several stories published in regional magazines in the '70s, and a novel, *The Face of the Deep* (Pocket Books), published in 1979, "Microde City" is his first sale to a professional SF magazine.

Art: Bob Walters



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I.

Johnny always wanted scales. At least that's what he told me the time we saw an exhibit of life-sized dinosaur models in St. Paul when we were about nine or ten. Maybe that wasn't the only thing that was wrong with him, but it shows that he was going in a kind of distorted direction even then.

Johnny Stevens was my cousin. Probably my best friend at one time, when we were both in our early teens. I guess he was a lot smarter than me, but he was also a lot less stable. He went through an accelerated high-school program and finished a couple of years at Princeton before he dropped out. That was when he was nineteen. He called me once after that, when I was out somewhere, and he left a message with my mother, and that was the last any of us heard from him. I always figured he went to live in California. Surf, cheap drugs, endless summer—everything a wild-assed Minnesota boy could ever want.

The summer after I finished my master's degree, I went out to New York to stay with friends for a few weeks, with the idea of maybe writing about the music scene. I had quit playing in bands by then; I was working part-time as a proofreader, and getting occasional free-lance jobs at a Minneapolis entertainment cable channel. A couple of my friends from the station had gone to New York and found jobs, so I figured it was my turn to try.

That's how I wound up going to hear a scope band called the Skopsies play in a bombed-out theater on Avenue A. It was about eight o'clock at night, and I was riding the R train from where my friends Moustapha and Alice lived in Brooklyn to Manhattan, when I ran into Johnny. He was standing on the platform, letting the joneses pass him by, watching the creatures carefully.

I wouldn't have recognized him, because he'd had himself microded into a wolfman, except that he was wearing a Minnesota Vikings muscle shirt. That made me look at him carefully, and, beneath all the hair, and even with the snout and the canine teeth, I could see that it was him.

"Johnny!" I yelled, as the doors of the car opened.

He looked around, stared right into my eyes without recognizing me, and the hair on his neck and shoulders raised up. Then he bared his fangs.

"Johnny, it's *me*, Tim!" I yelled. I dashed through the crowd and onto the platform, where the smell of piss and vomit and the heat assaulted me. "Tim *Wandel*. Your cousin!"

"Son of a bitch," he mumbled, scratching his crotch. "Tim." He looked at me for a moment, then leaned forward very casually and said softly near my ear, "Get the fuck outta here. Something's about to go down,

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and I don't want you around. Here," he told me, as he leaned away, reached into a back pocket of his shorts, and pulled out a strip of paper about the size of the fortune you get in a fortune cookie. "You take this, get back on that train, and call me tomorrow."

I looked down at the paper, saw there was a phone number printed on it, and stumbled backward.

"Get going. Quick!"

The warning chime rang, and I stepped back into the subway car. At least the air conditioning was working in there. As the train pulled out of the station, I saw Johnny walking casually toward an approaching group of people, but then the train accelerated into the tunnel and I couldn't see any more.

I had a couple more stops to go before I got off the train, so I stared at the people in the car for something to do. It occurred to me that I was one of maybe three people there who hadn't been microded in some way, at least for muscles and height. There were only a couple of creatures, though—two wolfmen seated near the door, holding hands.

II.

As scope goes, the Skopsies were pretty lame. But my friend Monica Sammler was there, so I hung with the program to the end. Monica had worked at the station with me until she moved to New York last year and got a job with *Scope* magazine. After the last set, Monica and I went outside and sat on top of a parked car that belonged to the group, waiting for the band members to show up. It had cooled off, though it was so humid you could see your breath in the glare of the streetlights. The air reeked of the sickly sweet aroma of gasahol, as it always does in New York.

"So," Monica said, "was that def or what?"

"It didn't do it for me."

"Well, they're def in *this* town."

"They're okay," I told her.

That was when the band finally showed up. Monica introduced us as we crowded into the car and drove off toward midtown for food.

The lead singer, a woman with a snakeskin microde job, was squeezed in beside me.

"So, you like us?" she asked me.

"Yeah," I said, as convincingly as I could.

"My name is Eva. Monica said you were from Minneapolis?" The woman had the damnedest accent I'd ever heard. Sort of generic Eastern European.

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"Yeah, that's right. I'm Tim."

"It's quite a town. We have played it."

"Yeah, well, it's okay."

"I know someone from there. He's my microde synthesist."

"What's his name?"

"Johnny."

I glanced into her eyes. Her microde job was so good even her pupils were snakelike; as I looked at her, she blinked, using her nictitating membrane.

"It's not Johnny Stevens, is it?"

"I do not know his last name. He never uses it."

This was too weird for me; I hadn't even heard from the guy in eight years, and then I not only run into him, but meet one of his clients.

"What are you thinking?" the snake-woman asked me.

"If it's the Johnny *I* know, then that's really strange."

"Johnny is the very best microde artist there is, you know," she said, smiling strangely, as though she were amused by something only she could sense. Then she looked at the keyboard player. He was driving manually, even though we were in one of the computerized, high-security zones of Manhattan. "Vlad," she told him, "take me somewhere where I can have steak tartare."

"But that's raw meat, Eva," Monica said, disgusted.

"I know," the snake-woman replied, smiling again.

III.

My friends Alice and Moustapha lived in a tiny apartment near Prospect Park, and they both worked day jobs. In the early morning twilight I heard them taking showers, fixing breakfast in the kitchen, and getting ready to go, so I forced myself awake and staggered in from the sofa in the living room.

"Good morning, sunshine," Alice said. "You don't look *too* much the worse for wear."

"Good morning to you, too."

"You didn't have any—security trouble last night, did you?" she asked.

"No hammerheads, if that's what you mean."

She smiled; she seemed relieved.

"So, how was the band last night?"

"It was okay." I could have said more, but it wasn't worth it. "The really funny thing is that I ran into my cousin last night. I may wind up staying over at his place. I'm going to try to get in touch with him today."

"Well, just let us know, so that we can program the security system."

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"You're up awful early," Moustapha said as he walked into the kitchen carrying Alice's kevlar safety cloak. He has a very strong southside Minneapolis accent, which seemed so out of place in this over-priced safe-deposit box of a Brooklyn apartment that I couldn't help but smile. "So, how was the big band last night?"

"I wasn't very impressed."

"How was Monica?" he asked. He had always hated her, back when they both lived in south Minneapolis and worked at the station with me.

"She's got herself microded. She's an amazon."

Moustapha said, "Hmm," and he and Alice exchanged glances.

"Some of us are content to be joneses," Alice announced in a stagey, fake-Cockney accent.

"And some of us have to get to work," Moustapha told her, as he held up her cloak. She allowed him to drape it over her shoulders, and then Moustapha got his own protective gear out of the hall closet and put it on.

"Leave us a note about your plans," Alice said, as they were walking through the security exit. "By the way, we want to take you out to dinner Friday night."

"Fine," I told them. After the security system had cycled shut, I plodded back to the sofa and went to sleep.

It was three in the afternoon when I woke up, according to the antique dial clock on the wall. I showered, and then programmed a cup of coffee on the kitchen system. For a few minutes I sat there at the rickety kitchen table, drinking my coffee and eating a bagel with cream-cheese on it, wondering what Johnny was up to.

I accessed the phone and punched in my credit-card code, and then typed the number Johnny'd given me the night before in the subway station.

The telephone screen phased through several colors, and then a parade of creatures marched across it. It took me a while, because the screen was so small, but finally I figured out that they were all Egyptian gods. Gradually the volume increased, and the images began to dance to some kind of Caribbean-sounding music as the words "Microde City" formed in the background. The camera did a spiral pull-in and focused on an ibis-headed creature: Thoth, I told myself, impressed by how real it looked for a computer-generated graphic.

"For the very *best*," Thoth announced in a breathy voice, "you have in you, Microde City." And here the view cut away to a shot of Eva, the snake-woman of last night, as she began to sing, "Let me wrap you, wrap you, in my arms; let me squeeze you till your cells cry out; let me twist you, sister. . . ." I realized then this wasn't a graphic, but a video. The

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song went on for a few moments in a very fast scope tempo, then cut away to a viewer dialog panel. I punched in the code for a private appointment.

"Your cost-free initial interview can be scheduled for the following times," a sexless synthovoice announced. A list of dates and times, starting next week, flashed on the screen. I pressed in the code for "other."

"How may I help you?" asked the synthovoice.

"I want to talk to my cousin, Johnny," I replied.

The screen went blank.

For a moment, I thought the answering system must have panicked, figuring that I was the cops or something, but then a simple blue screen appeared with the words, "Please hold," blinking across it.

I finished my cup of coffee while waiting, and then Johnny started speaking, without a visual.

"Tim, thanks for calling." He sounded like any jones sounds on a business call.

"What the hell was going on last night?"

"You have to deal with some scary people in this business sometimes, man. It was just part of the job."

I thought about that for a while, then said, "I met one of your clients last night. She's the singer with the Skopsies, the one with the snakeskin in your phone ad."

"Oh, yeah, for Microde City. Her name's Eva. She's sweet."

"She eats raw meat, Johnny."

"Well, that's legal."

"But it's—disgusting."

"Life in the big city, guy. So, when you want to get together?"

"Hey, I'm open. I'm just hanging out for a couple of weeks." I didn't want to tell him that I was really looking for a job; it might seem like I was hitting on him.

"You got plans for dinner tonight?" he asked.

"No."

"You do now. Get over here around nine." He gave me an address in lower Manhattan, and I wrote it down on a scrap of paper. "Square?"

"Square."

"Hey, Tim, you see my mom recently?"

"Naw. She moved to Guam to work on the new rocket base down there."

"Oh."

I couldn't think of anything to say for a moment, and then I figured I'd ring off.

"Well, I'll be seeing you," I said at last.

"Uh, listen, Tim. Don't tell your parents you're in touch with me, okay?"

"Okay."

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"And listen. You may not recognize me when you get here."
"Huh? Didn't I recognize you last night?"
"That was a replicant, Tim. I've got a different thing."
"Is that why you don't have the camera on?"
"It's for security. Listen, I've gotta go. See you tonight."
He broke the connection and the screen went dead.

IV.

Johnny lived in the high-security zone around Washington Square, so I had to stop at a checkpoint on West 10th Street to get a transponder pass valid for twenty-four hours. It was about a five-minute walk down to the address Johnny had given me on West 8th Street, an early twentieth-century apartment house by the look of it. It was the kind of quaint brick-and-granite building that made me think of New England, especially when I glanced up at the towering brutalist-revival projects that thrust across the horizon like the rotting teeth of giants.

I presented the pass card at the door, was scanned and checked through to the lobby, where I found an elevator waiting for me. As soon as I pressed the button for the penthouse, a synthovoice announced, "Mr. Stevens is expecting you, Mr. Wandel."

The elevator took me to a small, dimly lit lobby decorated in an Egyptian motif—hieroglyphics and paintings of animal-headed deities covered the walls, and the floor was a burnished, red stone. At the far end of the corridor, above a short flight of stairs, stood a monumental door.

When I reached the bottom step, the door opened. A jackal-headed T-man, wearing only a pair of red soccer shorts, stood at the threshold, staring down at me.

"You Tim?" the creature asked.

"Yeah."

"Come on in." I went up the stairs and entered a long reception area that looked something like an ancient Egyptian temple, defined by two rows of terra-cotta pillars with tangerine-colored sheer curtains behind them.

"You guys are really into Egypt, huh?" I asked.

"Yo. It's big this year. Have a seat," he told me, gesturing at a chaise longue. "The boss's almost done. Wouldya like somethin' to drink?" The more he spoke, the thicker his Bronx accent became.

"I'll take an iced tea if you've got one."

"Sure. 'Scuse me. I'm just leavin', but I'll tell da night staff to bring you a' iced tea. Ya want sugah in it?"

"No."

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I sat down on the chaise longue and looked through the pile of magazines heaped on what looked like a genuine wood coffee table. They were all fashion magazines, most of them the avant-garde microde mode.

"Hello," a woman said. "I'm Ray-lee."

I looked up to see a rather good-looking blonde dressed in a blue jumpsuit. As far as I could tell, she was as jones as me.

"If you like iced tea," she added, "I recommend Earl Grey."

"Fine," I said.

She looked at me quizzically for a moment, and then I couldn't help but ask her, "How come you're not microded?"

"Leavening. Johnny likes a bit of jones around the place." She walked over to a table and typed in the order for my tea on a built-in keyboard.

"Your drink will be ready in a few minutes. Excuse me, and I'll see if Johnny is ready for us." She turned and put her hands in her jumpsuit pockets and strolled away through the columns.

As I watched her go, I thought about trying to get to know her better; then I rejected the thought. It was her use of the word "us." The way she said it, it was a highly exclusionary term.

"Tim!" Johnny's voice boomed from behind the sheer curtains at the far end of the hall of columns. "Come in, come in!"

So I got up and walked toward the curtains. For an instant, I hesitated this side of the screen; I could see there was a massive desk in the room beyond, and a shadowy figure behind that. As I passed through a fissure in the curtain, the figure swiveled in its dark judge's chair, turning to touch a control panel behind it. All I could do was stare at the desk, which glowed with gold-leaf in the twilit office; it looked for all the world like an Egyptian sarcophagus.

"Johnny?" I said. My voice sounded hoarse.

"I'm just putting some music on," Johnny replied. I could glimpse his hand typing in instructions on a console behind the desk.

Then the chair swiveled.

A creature sat there. It was vaguely like a man, but covered with scales rather like a pangolin's.

"I said you might not recognize me," Johnny said.

"How are you?" I asked. I couldn't think of anything better to say.

"Well. Top of the world. All that shit. Sit down." He gestured toward a divan, and I stumbled over to it. Classical Indian music began to play softly from ceiling speakers.

Johnny walked from behind the sarcophadesk. He was naked, but his scales hid his genitals. Strangest of all, he had a long, prehensile tail.

"So, what are you doing in New York?"

"I came out to visit some friends. Try to write a little. That kind of thing."

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"You want a job?"

I swallowed and asked, "D'you have one?"

"I've got an opening in my public relations office. You're welcome to take the test for it. But there's a catch."

"And that is?"

"You can't stay jones."

"But—uh, no offense, Johnny—I don't want to be a creature."

"I'm not saying you have to be creative." He may have smiled; I couldn't tell, the scales covered the corners of his mouth. "But you've got to be a T-man for the job. You get it free, along with housing and medical." Maybe he smiled again; he paused long enough to do so. "I'm a good employer."

The woman in the blue jumpsuit entered the office, pushing a tea trolley. She handed me my glass of iced tea and gave Johnny an Irish coffee, and then she sat down in a bowl chair.

"Have you been introduced?" Johnny asked.

"We've already met," she said pleasantly. I nodded back at her; she had one of the three or four best smiles I've ever seen. Then I forced myself to look back at Johnny.

"Listen, what is it exactly that you *do?*" I asked him.

He tilted his head to one side—a gesture that reminded me of an iguana.

"Think of me as a revolutionary." He paused again. "Because what I've done in the last six years is a total revolt, man. Other people started it. I admit that. They've been using viruses to cure genetic diseases for almost thirty years. But *I'm* the one who came up with the idea of turning it into the microding industry."

He sipped at his Irish coffee, and then he paused once more. Maybe he *was* smiling; I still couldn't tell. "And that solved the race and the crime problem at the same time," he said.

I wasn't sure if he really believed that or not. At the time, I know that *I* didn't.

"Somebody had to be the revolutionary, Tim," he added at last, after a long silence. "It just happened to be me."

"I'm going to get dinner," Ray-lee said.

"What are we having?" I asked.

"Garlic shrimp. It's one of my specialties."

She got up and pushed the tea trolley off through a break in the curtains, and glanced back at Johnny as though she thought she might lose him by leaving the room. It was a look so intense it made me squirm to be caught in the same building with it.

"So what was going down last night with your replicant in the subway—a sideshow in the revolution?"

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"Hammerheads," he began to say, as the sitar music swelled; when the musical storm subsided, he turned to me and began to speak once more. "You know, the hammerheads are something I didn't anticipate. They even started their own keiretsu. But I think we'll be able to handle them. Eventually."

Ray-lee entered with the meal on the tea trolley, and the raga built to a new climax.

We didn't say much during the meal, though Ray-lee tried to make light dinner conversation. Johnny seemed to be brooding over his food, though it was hard to tell through the scales. Afterwards, he told me that he had another appointment, and got up to escort me outside. As he walked me back into the terra-cotta corridor, he asked very casually, "Do you want to work for me?"

"I'll have to think about it."

"I can offer you a hundred and fifty grand and housing. I know the salary isn't much, but you get full medical and microde benefits, too. You've got the number. Call me." He opened the massive door leading out to the elevator lobby. "Either way, call me. But let me know by the middle of next week, okay?"

He shook my hand for the first time then. His palm was dry and scratchy, and I had the sense he was much stronger than I would have thought.

"Okay?" he asked again.

"Okay, I'll call you."

I had to think about it.

V.

When I woke up the next morning on Alice and Moustapha's sofa, they'd already left for work. I wandered out to the kitchen, hardly awake, and made a small breakfast for myself. While I was waiting for the coffee to brew, I turned on their TV to watch one of the news channels. It was the mid-summer silly season, and I blipped through the spectrum until I saw coverage of a new line of microde fashion for the fall, designed by someone (or something) called Saavedra.

It had to be some of Johnny's competition.

While I sat there munching my toasted whole-wheat bagel, I started thinking that New York seemed to be a separate country of its own. In Minneapolis, or other places I'd lived in the U.S., the changelings weren't anywhere near the majority. Microding was bound to have an enormous market in the high-crime, high-racial-tension areas, of course. Eventu-

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ally it would probably spread out to the rest of the country. If you could spend five grand and become Conan or Wonder Woman, wouldn't you do it? And then there was the social security crisis: Washington's decision to pay for rejuvenation, as long as you agreed to work for another thirty years without receiving retirement benefits, had only added momentum to the whole thing.

Which brought me down to the big question: Should I accept Johnny's offer?

He was a bright guy. No doubt about that. But there'd always been that twisted quality about him, and it seemed as though it had gotten worse with time. Maybe his pangolin suit was state-of-the-art microding. To me, it just made it clear that he hated people, and hated himself for being one.

My mind wandered to Ray-lee; she had to be a lot stranger than she looked, if she was living with him.

She had to like scales, for one thing.

VI.

Alice and Moustapha took me to their favorite Chinese restaurant, over in the Bay Ridge high-security zone. Over dinner, they complained about the international entertainment network they both worked at, and I told them about the offer Johnny had made me.

"I'm not sure if I should take it or not," I added.

Moustapha didn't like the idea. I could tell by the way he sort of hunkered over his moo-shu pancake. When I looked over at Alice, she demurely sipped her tea so that she wouldn't have to make eye contact.

"Microding is so dishonest," she said finally. And that was as near as I got to discussing with them what was on my mind. Eventually we finished our meal and walked back outside. Since it was a high-security zone, they didn't put their bullet-proof cloaks on until we reached the checkpoint adjacent to the subway station.

We joined a line of people going through the checkpoint. The line stalled, and several of the people ahead of us started yelling at the cop in the kiosk to fix the turnstile.

Abruptly, the siren on top of the police kiosk sounded.

"What the hell?" a fat man in front of Moustapha muttered, turning to look at us as though *we* knew what was going on.

There was a popping sound. At first I thought it was somebody setting off firecrackers, but by that time Moustapha was pushing me and Alice to the sidewalk. He threw his kevlar cloak over us. Gunfire.

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A woman was screaming somewhere on the other side of the checkpoint, and there were several more gunshots. Somebody else started screaming along with the woman, and then a couple of squad cars screeched to a stop down near the subway entrance.

"Okay, everybody up," hollered one of the cops. "Please exit the checkpoint in an orderly fashion. Everybody up."

Moustapha pulled his cloak off me, and I looked around. Alice was rubbing her elbow, and there was a funny quiver in her eyelids. Moustapha took her hand and helped her to her feet.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Dunno," Moustapha answered. "I guess we'll see."

We went through the turnstile, and saw a team of paramedics working over a woman who was sprawled in the middle of the street. There were three dead hammerheads strewn across the road down by the subway stop where the squad cars were parked.

All three of the corpses wore the same style of baggy, shiny clothing, but somehow their bodies didn't seem quite right underneath it. Their enormous eyes stared outward from vaulting lobes very much like a hammerhead shark's, and blood oozed away from them across the pavement.

"Jesus Christ," Alice muttered, looking up at Moustapha.

"How the fuck did they get down here?" Moustapha asked.

"That's the first frenzy we've had in Bay Ridge," the heavy-set man in front of us said to no one in particular.

We had to walk past the corpses of the hammerheads before we got to the subway entrance, and I heard one young cop telling another, "This is fucking unbelievable," shaking his head as he spoke.

When we got into the safety of the subway station, I said to Moustapha, "I've read about hammerheads, but I've never *seen* them before."

Alice looked away nervously.

"I thought we were getting over random violence in this country," Moustapha muttered. "But this is worse than the drug lords ever were. They're trying to soften us up for something."

"Like what?" I asked.

"I don't know."

It was so hot in the station, and what had just happened on the street was so much with us, that none of us felt like talking. I leaned against a girder and the sweat trickled down my sides underneath my shirt. Be thankful the station doesn't smell too bad, I told myself.

That was when I decided I was going to work for Johnny. At least for a while.

A guy's gotta do *something* to protect himself.

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VII.

There isn't a whole lot to getting microded. They draw a little blood, separate out your genes and splice them with whatever else you need. After that, they pack it into a synthetic virus, shoot you full of it, and the virus infects every cell in your body. Within a couple of weeks, the effects start showing.

My problem was that I turned out to be one of the unlucky few who come down with something like the flu after being injected with microde virus. For about a week I had a fever and stayed in bed in the tiny efficiency apartment Johnny had put me in when I'd signed the contract with him.

I managed to get into the office—located several floors beneath Johnny's penthouse apartment—some ten days after getting my microde shot. By that time, my face had broken out in acne and my hairline, though it had been nowhere near as bad as my German grandfather's at my age, was starting to fill in with golden fuzz.

As it turned out, Ray-lee was my boss. I wasn't sure if I liked that.

When I entered her office that morning, she had some kind of classical rock playing; the Doors or Echo and the Bunnymen, something like that.

"Good morning, Tim," she said as I entered the room. She turned down the music. "How are you feeling?"

"A lot better."

"Have you talked to the medics this morning?"

"Not yet. I'll see them after this."

"Let's get down to business then," she said, leaning back in her chair. "For the first six months, we're going to have you on a physical development program. How does that strike you?"

She was wearing a herringbone jumpsuit with the zipper open to somewhere near the ground floor. It took me a moment to react to what she'd said.

"All right," I finally managed to answer.

She looked at me quizzically, then an expression of faint disdain crossed her face.

"First off, you need to read the computer file on the upscale division, the 'Johnny' line. I want you up to speed by the end of the week. We have to get the fall selections ready for in-house previewing next Monday." She smiled conspiratorially. "We're going to do chameleon," she said softly through her smile.

"But you'll read about it. And when we get done with that, we have to work on recycling the Egyptian stuff into the Microde City discount line. Any questions?"

I shook my head.

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"Fine." She gazed at me and said, "Listen, Tim, there are some closely held projects going on here. Eventually you'll get in on all of them. In the meantime, if you come across a file you can't get access to, tell me. Don't talk to anyone else about it. You understand?"

"Worried about leaks?"

"Not really." She smiled once more. It was a smile that should have been in video; she was wasting it working an office job. I hardly noticed the gritty tone in her voice at all when she did that.

"Why don't you go see the medics then, and after that, we'll get started." She glanced back down at the screen built into her desk and I turned and left her office. The door valved shut behind me.

VIII.

When you get into a routine divided between intense physical workouts and equally intense paper-shuffling, you don't notice time. Seasons, yes; it was summer. That much I could figure out.

As the doctors told me, after you get microded, your body does a rerun of late adolescence, and that only adds to the time-dilation effect. I was horny and hungry most of the time that I wasn't exercising.

The other reason I didn't notice the time was Ray-lee's practice of working you till you dropped, and then screaming at you if you stopped to see what you were going to land on once you reached bottom. One of my coworkers, a Conan from marketing named Henderson, told me that Ray-lee had been an actress at one time. She was talented, all right. I just wish she could have focused that talent on somebody else.

Looking back on it, I'm sure they were working the bejesus out of me to keep me from whoring across Manhattan and winding up dead somewhere. There's nothing like adolescence the second time around.

Johnny and Ray-lee must have known it intimately.

IX.

My job was to write publicity releases for the company's fall line without really saying what it was all about. There is an art to these things, and whenever I thought I'd figured out a way to do it, Ray-lee would tell me to do it differently. Maybe it would have helped if I'd have had some idea of exactly what they were going to *do* with the fall line; but Ray-lee didn't tell me much, and Johnny was spending all of his time up at the laboratory in Connecticut.

The week before we were going to host a big party to open the fall

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publicity campaign, we had a staff TGIF. We celebrated at a couple of different night-spots, and a couple of hours later, I wound up at a rooftop bar talking to Henderson from marketing and the woman from the lab in Connecticut, Meryl Ellen Merril, who tracked what the competition was doing.

Meryl Ellen was an Earth Goddess, about two meters tall and weighing about one hundred kilos, but she'd been drinking green Russians all night and was suddenly very drunk.

"Y'know what," she said, turning to me as though she'd just realized that I was there, "Johnny's up t'somethin'. It's big. Real big. We've put new security on at the lab. And nobody's seen him for days."

"He's always like that before he announces the fall line," Henderson told her.

"No, no—it's not that. You can feel it up there. I think he's working on the hammerhead stuff again."

"What hammerhead stuff?" I asked.

"The same stuff he was working on when Karnovsky defected. You can just *feel* it up there." She finished her drink. "Tension, I mean." For a moment she sat there, looking past us, then she excused herself and went to the women's room.

"So who was Karnovsky?" I asked Henderson.

"Some guy who supposedly defected to the hammerheads. Actually, the cops thought he was kidnapped. But he took a bunch of stuff from the lab, so they've been calling him a defector ever since."

We waited for quite a while for Meryl Ellen to return. After nearly twenty minutes, Henderson got up to go see if she was all right. He never came back, and neither did she. I was getting sleepy, so I made my way back home.

The next week, just two days before the debut of the fall line, I came across my first secret file.

It was in a folder marked "Hammerhead," in a library Ray-lee had given me the entrance code for that morning. There were three items in the folder: a chronology of reports on the hammerheads from the press; a file containing nothing but an address and phone number in Oakland, California; and a final one called "Retromicrode," with a blinking "access limited" beneath the title.

I couldn't get into the document with my access code, of course.

As far as I knew, no one had ever developed a reliable way to reverse a microde job completely. You might be able to eliminate a lot of the new characteristics introduced by a microde virus, but nobody had managed to get rid of all of them.

So it meant that Johnny was trying to retromicrode hammerheads.

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And however he was trying to do it, he didn't want anybody to know anything about it.

I didn't have any doubt he had some kind of connection with them. For a moment, I even wondered if Johnny might not have created them. I tried to argue myself into trying to break into the file.

Instead, even though I was getting fed up with her, I went in to see Ray-lee and told her what I'd found.

"*That* shouldn't be there," was her response. She looked quickly at me, then frantically typed away at her keyboard. When she finished tapping away at the contact spots, she looked up at me again. "There. That's taken care of. Thanks for letting me know you found that, Tim." She gave me one of those really incredible smiles of hers—maybe the first one I'd seen in several weeks.

"You didn't tell anybody else about this, did you?"

"No."

"Good." She looked out her window at the street below, and then back at me. "We had some trouble with one of the people at the lab a few years ago. He put a lot of things in public access and then disappeared. If we're lucky, that's the last one left in the system."

"What's it all about?" I didn't let on about what Henderson and Meryl Ellen Merrill had told me a few days earlier.

"We're trying to figure out where the hammerheads came from."

"I thought it was Asia."

"That's not what I mean. We're trying to pin down the lab that first produced their microde. It's awfully hard to do." She smiled again.

Maybe my second adolescence was already starting to wear off. I don't know. But when she smiled, I thought she was lying.

X.

Johnny held the big party to introduce his fall line in the penthouse. Ray-lee had ordered all of us to show up half an hour early, wearing tuxedos. I was stunned, when I exited the elevator into the hieroglyphic-filled lobby, to find a very human-looking Johnny Stevens welcoming everyone. He was total jones, without a single scale on him, and even he was wearing a tux. In fact, he looked a lot like he did the last time I saw him before he ran away, back when he was about seventeen, except that now his hair was shorter.

"Welcome, Tim," Johnny said. "Ray-lee would like to see you. She's inside, by the runway."

"Fine," I told him, practicing the professional smile Ray-lee had been teaching me. We shook hands, but there was something about his palm

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that didn't feel quite right—not warm and sweaty the way a person's hands really are. It was a replicant, of course.

As I walked through the crowd, I wondered how many replicants Johnny owned. I'd run into two of them. Each one was supposed to cost a couple of billion plus. In the movies, they're cheaper to use than stuntmen, of course; you don't need insurance, and don't have to worry about lawsuits. That's why they were invented. But this was just business.

Unless Johnny was expecting some kind of security incident tonight.

For all I knew, he might be up at the high-security lab in Connecticut, plugged in to a relay station on-line to this replicant. But it was so good, most of the guests wouldn't know that it was a robot.

Then again, it might just be part of the show. I remembered what Ray-lee had said that first night I had dinner with them, something about leavening for this recombinant-DNA, funanimal world.

All the curtains had been removed along the perimeter of the hall, revealing a series of vestibules filled with Louis XVI side chairs. Off to one side, a classical guitarist was setting up his sound system.

Ray-lee was wearing a yellow satin gown, something like the robe on the Statue of Liberty. The two people from the marketing department, Henderson and the stilt-microded Crawford, were already hovering beside her.

"Good evening, Tim," she said as I joined them.

"Hi."

"I was just running through the schedule again." She looked at her wristwatch. "The guests will start arriving at eight, the background music begins at 8:15, and the show starts promptly at nine. Circulate until just before the show begins, then take your places in the elevator lobby to welcome any late arrivals." The Bronx Anubis appeared, wearing an Egyptian-sort-of robe, carrying a Campari and soda. She took the glass and sipped at it. "And there *will* be late arrivals."

"Ya welcome," Anubis said under his breath as he stalked away, clearly irritated at her.

She smiled at us then, perhaps the most sincere gesture I'd ever seen her make. It was a smile that presupposed victory of some kind. "And remember, dears, don't even *hint* at what Johnny plans to say."

"Which is easy, 'cause we don't *know* what he's going to say," Henderson told her.

"I know. But don't even hint." She smiled again and sipped her drink.

A little late, but in very large numbers, the guests arrived. Most of them were fashionably reconstructed—faces and bodies reminiscent of filmstars and Olympiads—though there were occasional joneses who looked old and frail and fabulously rich. Not just wealthy, but downright *rich*. One group of them showed up dressed alike in the most expensive

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clothes I'd seen yet: a liquid-crystal fabric displaying moving patterns like the ads down at Times Square.

But this show wasn't about clothes.

It was about flesh.

"You're new here," a blonde Wonder Woman said to me as she grabbed me by the bicep. Her hand more than went around my arm.

"Hi," I said, smiling.

"What's the big story tonight?"

"The boss has an announcement to make after the show," I told her. "That's all I know."

She pouted and let my arm go; then Monica Sammler bounced up through the crowd and hugged me.

"Monica, how'd you get in here?"

"I'm covering the show for the magazine."

"Hey."

She looked at me, sort of sheepishly, and I knew what she wanted to ask.

"I don't know what he's going to say, Monica."

"Okay. Let's get something to drink."

"I'm under orders to circulate."

"Then circulate with me."

Monica and I roved through the masses pressed into the neo-Egyptian hall, while the guitarist got his sound system working and began to play Villa-Lobos. She introduced me to a bunch of conceited newspeople whose names I didn't catch, and then the show began.

The guitarist started playing some kind of flamenco riff, and Ray-lee announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Johnny fall collection." She faked an upper-crust British accent that dripped with suppressed lust.

A guitar flourish; the lights rheoed down, and the spots came up on the runway, focusing on a woman wearing a mesh bikini. She was stunning—her hair tawny, her eyes almond shaped. But she looked as jones as the old people with the liquid-crystal clothes.

"Fall will be a season for subtlety," Ray-lee continued in her husky, received-standard English. "*Except* when warranted."

And then the woman in the swimsuit began to change color. By the time she'd walked to the end of the runway, her skin had gone beyond tan into the near-chocolate. She threw up her hands and bowed, a very Marilyn stance. Then she turned and began to walk slowly back, her skin color lightening with each pace. The crowd started to applaud, moderately, but firmly.

Johnny had a whole line of chameleon numbers ready—each one slightly more exotic than the others, culminating in a feathered couple

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who seemed to be making love standing up as their feathers pulsed through the visible spectrum. At that, the crowd went wild, and the guitarist played the most frenzied and hackneyed classical Spanish riffs imaginable.

Monica held onto my arm when the spots went out, leaving the hall in darkness as the guitar banged away to the conclusion of a kind of mutant "Malagueña."

Gradually the spots came back up and focused on Johnny's replicant, which was standing in the middle of the runway.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, his voice sounding authoritative, almost like a newsman's, "you have seen a small indication of things to come. The fall will bring the most exciting, but subtle, changes of any of my seasons. Never before has technology allowed such a range of expression. And let me announce a spectacular breakthrough. Until *now*, no one has ever been able to completely reverse a microde design." He paused, and there was a buzz of reaction from the audience.

"Now, for the first time, we can offer a safe and thorough regression technique to the public. Developed during the last year in our laboratory by the chief of our research team, Dr. Antonia Salvatore, the Salvatore process will allow our new designs to be used to complement or replace any existing design.

"Let me add, ladies and gentlemen, that our most important discovery of the last year also has an extremely *practical* application. We have found a means to use the Salvatore process on even the most unfortunate of recombinant programs. I am talking about the hammerheads, ladies and gentlemen. And I am proud to say that we have turned over the formula to the United Nations today. We seek no profit—"

The crowd began to applaud; at first slowly, but then more enthusiastically. Johnny raised his hands, but it took several minutes for them to stop clapping.

"We seek no profit from this development," he said at last. "It is our contribution, our social contribution—a way of showing that we are committed to the improvement of the human condition. It is our belief that the hammerhead keiretsu combines cult, chemical dependence, and microding in a very dangerous way. Within a few years, if allowed to develop without hindrance, they would soon control most of the world. We will take steps to assure that our retromicroding technique ends this danger, once and for all."

The crowd had trouble believing it, I guess—I know *I* had trouble believing that Johnny was *saying* it, and I had caught a few hints about it in the past couple of weeks—but the applause built on itself, a waterfall gaining momentum, until it was overpowering.

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They brought up the hall lights and turned off the spotlights, and Johnny left the runway and mingled with the crowd.

"I never realized your boss was such a humanitarian," Monica said.

I was so stupefied by Johnny's announcement that I'd almost forgotten she was standing beside me.

"Neither did I," I told her.

XI.

After the last of the guests had gone, Johnny called me over to where he and Ray-lee were seated among the piles of empty plates and glasses.

"I want you to drive this replicant up to Connecticut tonight," he announced. "Ray-lee has to stay here."

"I'm pretty tired," I said. I looked at my wristwatch; it was getting on toward one.

"You can sleep up at the guest house. Ray-lee," he said turning to her as she sat beside him on the love-seat, "you take care of the shop, okay?"

"Yes, dear," she said, smiling. She looked more dissipated than I'd ever seen her before.

One of the char force started vacuuming.

"I don't think I can stay awake a minute longer," Ray-lee told him. Then she kissed him. He kissed her back; it had to be a good replicant if she didn't mind *that.*

"Why don't you use the guest suite down on the tenth floor, honey?" Johnny asked. "We'll escort you down."

"Okay."

"If I'm going to drive, I'm going to need some coffee," I said.

"No problem," Johnny answered. He got out his pocket phone and dialed up a cup of coffee in the kitchen of the guest apartment; by the time we dropped Ray-lee off, my coffee was ready.

Johnny didn't say much as we took the elevator down to the basement garage. He handed me the keys and led me over to a small, red Chevy with a dent on the driver's side.

"What're you staring at?" Johnny asked me.

"I just figured you'd have something a little more, um, upscale."

"I do. But we're going incognito tonight." He gestured toward the door.

I unlocked the car, got in and opened the passenger door. Johnny got in on his side and undid his tie, just as though he were really there.

"Drive out to the delivery area and punch into the Manhattan grid."

I yawned then, and shook my head.

"I wish to hell you could drive this thing."

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"Replicants can't drive on a public thoroughfare. You know that. It's the law."

I drank some coffee, breathed deep, then turned the car on and drove out to the street. Once outside, I pressed the car's brain into action, and it steered us out of Manhattan using the city grid. It took us about thirty minutes to reach the Merritt Parkway, where the city guidance system ends. By that time, I was awake enough to drive on my own.

"Johnny, you there?" I asked.

The replicant nodded sleepily, and turned to look at me.

"You're gonna have to talk at me if I'm gonna stay awake."

"Okay. You know where the lab is located?"

"Yeah. Branchville."

"And to get there, just watch for Route Seven, and take it north."

"Okay."

"So tell me, what did you think about tonight?"

"D'you mean the new line, or what you had to say?"

"Both."

I tried to think of some kind of diplomatic response. "Well, I thought the new designs were pretty impressive." I finished the coffee, now gone cold at the bottom of the cup. "I don't know what the hell to make out of what you said about the hammerheads."

"I'm glad you liked the new stuff." He paused briefly. "You know, I think the whole idea of microding is right at the cusp of getting stale. If we hadn't come up with something like Salvatore's process, I don't think we'd survive. A lot of other companies are onto the same thing. But we're there first with the most sophisticated design."

"And you know what I think?" I asked. "I think this is the first real step toward making microding just another, everyday kind of thing. Like cosmetics used to be."

"It's more than that, Tim." He pounded his fist against the dashboard and smiled. "It's the first time anybody has shown how wide-open our time is. They used to say the twentieth century was the American century. So what the hell is the *twenty-first* supposed to be?"

He paused for a moment, and I said, "Post-American?"

"Shut up." He laughed. "It's going to be the time when we stop trying to *hide* the fact that we're part animal, and start *dealing* with it instead. We're just scraping the surface with microding. We're at the threshold of something big—something really big. I can feel it." He put his hand out the window and moved it in the airflow. "Something as big as—civilization. I can feel it."

He leaned forward and fiddled with the sound system. A kind of ghostly rock song filtered out from the speakers. It sounded familiar. I'd heard it playing in the penthouse before.

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"What is that?" I asked.

"The Doors."

We let music engulf us; after "The Crystal Ship," Johnny turned the volume down.

"I want to let you in on a secret, Tim." I could see him gazing toward me out of the corner of my eye. "Tonight we seeded the atmosphere with an aerosol-borne microde virus that will undo every hammerhead recombination on Earth. So no matter what they do, we've won. It's just a matter of time."

I couldn't reply for a while, letting what he'd said sink in.

"You sure it's going to work?"

"Absolutely. We've run successful trials."

We turned off onto Route Seven then, and Johnny programmed the sound system to skip a few tracks ahead. An evil-sounding sitar cranked up out of the night as the track began.

"The hammerheads are the biggest threat," Johnny said. "Bigger than communism ever was. Probably bigger than fascism." Then, very softly, almost as though he were talking to himself, he asked, "And you know why?"

"Why?"

"It's because they're trying to shunt us *back* along an evolutionary line we gave up half a billion years ago."

I wasn't sure if I was just tired or what, but I didn't really understand that at all.

"I guess I'll have to sleep on that, man," I told him.

"What I mean is, they've figured out how to use microding and organized crime to run countries in a new way. But I don't think they realize what that *means*. You know, they really do worship the shark as a god."

"No, I didn't."

"And if you try to remake mankind in the image of the *shark*, then you're twisting evolution into a new channel, a mistaken channel, a dead end. That's what's really wrong with them."

The sitar-sound rose out of the speakers and transformed itself into the wail of an electric guitar as we drove over a hilltop.

XII.

"When you see the sign for 'Crofton,' turn right. Up there, see?" Johnny pointed at a white marker. "Okay, turn off here and stop by that mailbox. Close enough so I can reach the box from the car."

I made the turn, saw the rusty mailbox at the side of the road, and pulled over. Johnny reached out and put the flag up at the side of the

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box, then lowered it again. A van, parked about twenty meters up the road, flashed its headlights at us.

"Okay. We can go now. Just follow this road until you come to the gate. There'll be a guard house there."

"What *is* all this shit?"

"Security. We could have hammerheads on us any time now." Johnny chuckled. "And the goddamn Food and Drug Administration, too."

The road meandered through a hilly, hard-wood forest.

I don't know why I should have remembered it then, but for some reason the thought of Johnny and me visiting the science museum in St. Paul popped into my head.

"You remember the time we went to see the dinosaur show in St. Paul?" I asked him.

"No."

"You said you wanted scales, just like T. rex."

"I did, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I guess I've outgrown that. I'm right in the middle of a new transformation. You'll see me in a couple days and probably know me right off."

"Really."

"You'll see."

The road came to a halt in front of a solid wooden gate, flanked by a New England style fieldstone wall. There was a small half-timbered guardhouse with mirrored windows. No guards came out to check us, though; the gate simply opened instead.

"You might as well stop up to the guest house," Johnny told me. "I'll drive the car down to the lab."

"I thought replicants couldn't drive."

"Private property, isn't it?"

I pulled through the gate and stopped.

"You take it then. I'm beat." I set the parking brake and got out. Johnny slid over to the driver's seat, and I walked around and got in on the passenger's side.

The seat wasn't warm. A replicant had been sitting there, all right.

Johnny drove me up to a small cottage at the edge of a curve in the gravel driveway. It sat on a knoll looking down on a clearing filled with a white barn and a farmhouse.

"You'll find pajamas in the bedroom that ought to fit you," he told me. "Help yourself to breakfast in the morning, and when you get ready, join us down at the farmhouse."

"See you," I told him as I got out.

"Night."

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I shut the door and he drove off down the hill. For a moment I stood there watching the car's taillights, attempting to figure out if Johnny were *really* trying to prevent the hammerheads from changing the course of human evolution, or if he was so caught up in all the games he was playing that he couldn't tell reality from fantasy any more. I couldn't figure it out, so I walked over to the front door of the cottage in the surprisingly bright starlight, found it open, and went inside.

It didn't take me long to settle in, find the bedroom, and go to sleep.

Small-arms fire woke me up.

XIII.

No transition, no muzzy half-wakefulness; my eyes were wide open and I sat up in bed.

Gunshots at close range always have that effect on me.

A heavy explosion rocked the cottage, and I fell out of bed into the space between the bed-ruffle and the outside wall of the bedroom.

That's what saved me.

The next explosion blew out the bedroom window, and if I'd been in bed, the shards of glass would have done their own microde number on me.

Machine-gun fire answered the two bomb blasts, and I managed to roll under the bed. I looked out across the floor, and the whole cottage seemed wrong somehow; at first, I couldn't quite tell why. Gradually it dawned on me that there wasn't a right angle left in the place. The whole structure was leaning at a sixty-degree tilt.

I heard someone running down the gravel driveway, followed by the sounds of several other sets of feet, and then machine-gun fire opened up from somewhere near the gate.

It was answered by a kind of wordless screaming just outside the cottage. Somehow, it didn't quite sound human. I heard the distinctive crunch of bodies falling down across the gravel, followed by the sounds of another set of feet running along the driveway toward me.

There was a pounding on the cottage wall.

"Anybody in there? This thing's about ready to collapse."

"Yeah!" I shouted. "Over here!"

"You okay?"

"Yeah." I rolled out from under the bed, avoiding the clumps of broken glass on the floor.

A very compact man dressed in dark camouflage fatigues stood looking in through the window frame. The frame itself was a trapezoid now.

"Let me get my shoes on," I told him, as I slid them on. I grabbed my

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clothes off the chair and went out through the gap where the window had been.

"What happened?" I asked.

"We took missile hits. Come on with me. We're evacuating."

I followed him toward the shattered gate, looking back briefly over my shoulder. Down below, the barn was burning, and, by its light, I could see several hammerheads lying dead on the gravel road beyond the contorted wreck of a cottage.

XIV.

As far as the hammerheads were concerned, the attack was successful. They'd killed Johnny.

They would have gotten Ray-lee, too, if she had stayed in the penthouse, because a missile they launched gutted the three upper stories of the building on West Eighth.

But that was only for the moment, of course.

Because the retromicrode virus worked.

In retrospect, the virus probably worked better than Johnny figured it would. But it wasn't perfect by any means; a lot of hammerheads just got sick and died, many of them right in New York.

When the virus hit and the hammerheads started dying or retroing, and the swarms began to fall apart, there were financial panics all through the Pacific Rim. Most of the crank and dust cartels operated by the swarms imploded, and that brought down a lot of narcotics-based economies. I guess you could call it germ warfare, but it wasn't anything like the movies. The media started publishing a lot of stories about how the hammerheads had kidnapped people, microded them, and then brainwashed them.

Things started falling apart for me right then, so I didn't have much time to pay attention to all that.

XV.

For what Johnny had done, you'd think the Feds and the U.N. would've been grateful.

Instead, they started hitting us with a series of legal actions, accusing us of deliberately releasing an active recombinant virus into the atmosphere, and about two months after Johnny died, we had to sell the ruins of the penthouse to pay for legal expenses. After that, Ray-lee dragged us into meetings with lawyers as often as she had us working on the

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microde trade. On one of those occasions, when we were meeting with Maurice Golob—the very high-priced attorney the company had hired to handle the state-level cases against the company in New York and Connecticut—Ray-lee's phone rang.

She picked up the receiver and listened, gazed around at the cheap syntho-wood office we were working out of, and then she muttered something quietly several times. Her face grew pale, and her forehead puckered right between her eyebrows. She slammed the receiver down.

"What happened?" I asked.

She didn't answer for a moment. "The Feds have just charged us with environmental conspiracy. I'm cited specifically."

"Who was that who called?" Golob asked.

"Your office," she told him.

"Just calm down, Ray-lee. I'll talk to them."

He smiled reassuringly, but after he'd phoned his staff, he wasn't smiling any more.

XVI.

As it turned out, they arrested Ray-lee that very day. Eventually she was fined, spent six months in jail, and got five years' probation with several thousand hours of unpaid, "socially contributory" work tossed in. But she was lucky—she got no mandatory therapy.

I wish I'd been able to attend Ray-lee's trial, but I didn't have the time. They did call me to be a witness at a pre-trial hearing, and I keep trying to tell myself that what I said helped Ray-lee. But that was all I was able to manage. When the company was dissolved, I didn't have a job anymore, so I did a crash-course in writing résumés.

Worse yet, one of those faceless guys from the government had handed me an eviction notice. They were seizing my apartment as part of the company's assets and I had a month to get out.

At least I wasn't charged with being an accessory, like some of the surviving research people up in Connecticut.

For a couple of weeks, I thought I'd be able to land some kind of full-time writing job. I had three interviews and got one offer. It paid well enough, but there wasn't any housing allowance, so I had to turn it down.

About then my friends Alice and Moustapha called me to say they were moving to Vancouver. I lied and said things were going okay for me. After we said goodbye, I stared at the phone in my apartment for a couple of minutes. I had one less place to stay if I wanted to remain in New York.

Sometimes you just can't escape home at all. There wasn't any way I

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could stay where I was. But then, there wasn't anything *keeping* me there, either. So I called my sister, and she said I could crash with her for a few weeks until I got on my feet. After that, I did a little free-lance work for Monica over at *Scope* magazine. I earned enough to buy a bus ticket, and headed back to Minneapolis.

I don't think I've ever felt as wasted and crumpled up and thrown away as on that bus ride. A lot of the time I kept blaming myself for getting sucked into the whole thing, and then it occurred to me that maybe microding had made us think we could out-run all of our problems, death and the hammerheads included. Escape was part of what was going on in Johnny's head, I'm pretty sure; and it was probably inside me, more than I figured.

The first night on the bus I barely slept at all. I'm too tall now to fit comfortably into one of those things, and I kept getting glimpses of me in the bus window—an enormous creature with long blond hair—and not recognizing myself. Maybe it was time to go back to being jones. And maybe that was also why, somewhere before a bleak February dawn in Ohio, when I was in a kind of hallucinogenic state near sleep, I had this strange dream.

All of the dream had a sort of quicksilver sheen to it, as though I were seeing it played out in a mirror. It started out with the droning voice of the chairman at Ray-lee's pre-trial hearing: "Regarding the purpose of that firm's release of active microde virus . . ." On and on the chairman muttered, while our lawyer pushed me forward to stutter a few words about Johnny's humanitarian goals. . . .

And then I was going through an endless series of job interviews, conducted in mirrored rooms where giant versions of myself seemed to be asking all the questions and not liking the answers they were getting.

I left one job interview through a silvery door, and, without warning, found myself in the dimly lit lobby of the St. Paul science museum. Right in front of me stood Johnny, about age ten. And off to one side, glistening in a greenish light, were the dinosaur models. All the perspectives were distorted. Johnny was in his element, and I wasn't.

I woke up then, and it came to me as a kind of a three-o'clock-in-the-morning, bus-ride revelation that the time we went to the St. Paul science museum was a pivotal moment in Johnny's life. After that, he started creating a dream world that eventually redefined him and everybody else. And once he was gone, the rest of us were left to live in little pieces of that dream.

You know, that's one hell of an epitaph.

Not bad for a wild-assed Minnesota boy, I found myself thinking sadly. Not bad at all. ●

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A FALLING OUT

by Rick Wilber

My very best friend Tim
fell off the planet yesterday.
It was simply spinning too fast for him.

I saw him reach out for a hand
just as he spun off,
but I didn't react in time to help

and he was gone in a few seconds more.

He'd been feeling unstable for weeks,
had told me so over
and over at lunch yesterday
just before he left.

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It was something about
gripping hard onto the real in life,
or maybe it fastening onto him
(I'm not sure, I was only
half-listening and he was mumbling so).

But whatever . . .

we had just walked outside
to admire the cold rain
when he lurched once,
and then again, and then

his feet went forward and up
and his head came back at first
and then trailed those feet
into the gray sky.

He's my fourth good friend to go like that
in recent weeks,
and that should, I suppose, worry me.

But I'm firmly nailed
to the here and now.
I walk steady.
I keep it calm.

Which sounds mundane, I know,
and rather mediocre of me,
but then you didn't see
the look on Tim's face yesterday
when he fell right off.

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Weigher With Words

The Weigher
By Eric Vinicoff & Marcia Martin
Baen, $4.99 (paper)

Stories told from the alien's point of view are rare. *Good* stories told from the alien's point of view are even rarer.

Alien contact stories in which the exploring Terrans are likable, well meaning and brave are rare.

So Eric Vinicoff and Marcia Martin's *The Weigher* is a rare bird on three counts, and right there you have the set up for the novel. Our protagonist is one Slasher, several hundred pounds of female lupine carnivore with usable hands, an extraordinary sense of smell, and a sophisticated intelligence ("Omnivores!" she snorts in disgust at one point about the eating habits of the Terrans). Her culture has developed from a territorially oriented carnivorous beast, and has made astonishing strides—they know metallurgy and have a very complex economy based on, but not totally consisting of barter (they have the idea of "futures," for instance). What has held them back is the almost total lack of the ability to co-operate or to even live together; their towns are deserted at night as each individual goes to his territory. Slasher is the closest thing they have to controverting this problem—she is a "weigher," a judge who is paid to settle disputes and to bring accord before things get to the killing stage.

Out of the blue (literally—they descend by a sort of balloon parachute) come a series of peculiar beings. The first three are done in by Slasher's people almost immediately because they smell of danger and the carnivores react as immediately to smell input as humans do to sight. The religious community calls them demons; the savants are intrigued—are they escaped beasts of burden, perhaps, since they carry packs full of mysterious objects?

Before its death, however, the third creature teaches Slasher its language by a machine, and Slasher communicates with the next to appear—a pair of different sexes (Slasher's folk are also bisexual). They learn her language in the same way, manage to pacify their scent to that of flowers, and tell her that the stars are suns and they come from the planets of one such. Slasher, like any intelligent being, accepts this with no fuss, and sees a great business opportunity, since her position allows her to broker the aliens' knowledge for credit (for her and the aliens) with almost everyone in town. The hu-

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mans are honorable, refuse to teach anything that might be directly harmful, and are forbidden to kill sapient beings, which is why the first explorers allowed themselves to be killed despite their extraordinary powers.

So we follow the adventures of Slasher and her odd charges as she acquires a cub (the birth, acquisition, and rearing of children is only one of the many fascinating and well thought out facets of this society), has a rocky love affair, manages to get them all run out of town, travels with a more primitive nomadic tribe of her folk, and makes a river journey worthy of Huck Finn in a vessel pulled by a sort of giant catfish.

It's not often a novel comes along that is both as intelligent and as much fun as *The Weigher.*

Alex In Wonderland

Lord of the Two Lands

By Judith Tarr
Tor, $19.95

Many of the best of historical novels have a touch of fantasy to them. Renault's certainly do, as do Graves's Claudius novels and Naomi Mitchison's brilliant *The Corn King and the Spring Queen,* maybe the best historical ever published. It's as though, no matter how realistic and how authentic the historical aspects, the authors had to nod to the power over humanity that mysticism and the ancient religions had.

The conquest of Egypt by Alexander has been given fairly short shrift in histories and fiction, almost a side trip between the defeat of the Persian army at Issus and his final conquest of Persia. Only two aspects of the "invasion" of Egypt (it was pretty tame; the Egyptians were happy to be rid of their recently acquired Persian overlords) are usually mentioned: the epic siege of the island city of Tyre on the way, and Alexander's visit to the shrine of Zeus-Amon at the desert shrine of Siwah, where he was apparently granted extremely propitious omens.

In Judith Tarr's *Lord of the Two Lands,* Meriamon, an Egyptian woman, and the cat Sekhmet join Alexander's army at the battle of Issus; Meriamon is accepted in the healer's tent when she shows strong powers of healing, and proceeds on with the army when it becomes evident that she also has supernatural powers (in which at that time Egypt, land of wonders, was held supreme). Alexander accepts her as a friend, as does his lover Hephaistion, and it emerges that Meriamon has been sent by the powers of Egypt, natural and supernatural, to lead Alexander into the conquest of Egypt and the hated Persians and become the chosen "Lord of the Two Lands," that is, Pharaoh.

This novel may be unique in its delicate balance of history and fantasy—it's perhaps the best example of juggling both that I can think of. Each of the various cultures has its own magic, its own mages, its own gods (except, of course, the logic-loving Hellenes but not necessarily the more primitive Macedonians and Alexander's god-struck mother). Tarr manages to evoke these supernatural elements (as with Meriamon's "shadow," not hers per se but that of the god Anubis who accompan-

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ies her through the journey) without going too far afield into mysticism, a real feat.

All this may sound too stiff for words, but that's far from the case. Meriamon, king's daughter, priestess-singer to Amon, is rather a pert baggage with a mind of her own and her hectic romance with the Macedonian Niko, brother to the young general Ptolemy, is more Colbert/Gable than Bergman/Bogart. The supporting cast includes said Ptolemy (knowledge of whose future adds immeasurably to his participation), the legendary Persian woman Barsine (who according to Plutarch, but nobody else, bore Alexander a child), and the celebrated courtesan—or more correctly *hetaira*—Thaîs (who comments, "That was pure theater" on the celebrated first meeting between Alexander and the captured Persian Dowager Queen, Sisigambus—a story that Tarr chronicles nicely).

In all, this may be too much history for the fantasy readers and vice versa. With luck, there will be enough readers to appreciate the neat balance shown here.

Off-Told Tale

Mind Light

By Margaret Davis
Del Rey, $3.99 (paper)

In *Mind Light,* Margaret Davis serves up a very old story indeed. How about this? The owners of a freelance cargo vessel find themselves in desperate need of an extra pilot (*or* first officer *or* driver) and are in this dire predicament in the back of nowhere. They learn that there is one qualified p/fo/d in the town (*or* port *or* station) and search him out in the dingiest bar in town where he is dead drunk. Nevertheless, he signs the contract, they get him back to the vessel, put him to bed. He awakes not knowing where he is, ambiguously happy to have a ticket out of the boonies but angry at being taken advantage of.

He turns out to be a crackerjack operator, and the woman in the outfit finds herself drawn to him, but he is obviously having psychological problems dealing with his mysterious past. Still, it's obvious that he's a graduate of the Academy. (What academy? *The* Academy, of course.) It turns out that he has been drummed out of the Corps (what Corps? *The* Corps) for dreadful malfeasance, but, aha!, there is evidence that he's been framed. Familiar? It's an all-time useful plot.

In the case of *Mind Light,* the setting is an interstellar future, the ship is a family-owned, space-going vessel and the woman in question is Kiley, the captain, who runs the ship with her siblings and their respective mates. It is an inheritance from their father who has just died, which is why they need an extra hand. In a sleazy bar on a moribund space station, they come across Greg Lukas and in desperation sign him on.

Interspersed in this old familiar story are chapters dealing with an alien ship that has followed a sister ship into an unknown area of space, to find the other ship crashed on a desolate planet. There is some sort of barrier which sends the aliens' instruments amok and bars their way back. This all seems pretty irrelevant (in fact, since the first chapter deals with the aliens,

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with obscure references and alien terms, it's downright confusing), but does tie in with the story of Greg and Kiley eventually. Hint—the crashed alien ship is a major prize, of course, and some powerful men in the Corps decide to bend some rules to get it, using an underling as the fall guy.

I know, so far, that it sounds like I'm being negative about *Mind Light,* and this I regret. As someone pointed out, there are no new plots. This one is just a bit more familiar than some, and as usual, it depends on the handling. Davis is a smooth writer once things begin to fall into place, and her characters are more than usually alive on the page. And ain't it satisfying when the good guys win?

Fabulous Times

A Wealth of Fable
By Harry Warner, Jr.
SCIFI Press, PO Box 8442, Van Nuys, CA 91409, $25

A Wealth of Fable by Harry Warner, Jr., is subtitled "an informal history of science fiction fandom in the 1950s" which should give you a pretty good idea of what it's about. A new edition in hardcover is revised and enlarged with over two hundred photographs. It's the last mentioned (most of which are what used to be called snapshots) that are a special treat for readers of a certain age (as the French so delicately put it) since back then there wasn't a trade press where one could get an idea of what authors looked like. Here are finally some faces to go with names (Hannes Bok, John W. Campbell, Jr.) that were prominent then (and now, for that matter—dig the pretty young Marion Zimmer Bradley and the slyly handsome Lester Del Rey). However, it doesn't answer my number one question from that period—whatever became of Michael Wigodsky?

The book will be simply a farrago of names to younger readers, but they still might enjoy reading about the last of the days when every fan in the country above a certain level of activity (actifans, as opposed to passifans) knew every other one. No need to say what waves of nostalgia it will bring back for those "certain age" readers.

Dark Heart

Heart of Midnight
By J. Robert King
TSR, $4.95 (paper)

The term "dark fantasy" has cropped up lately, often used to mean anything in the way of a horror novel. Now there's always been a prime confusion in the horror novel between those which inspire horror by the breakdown of the rational human mind (*Psycho*) and those which inspire horror through the breakdown of the rational natural universe, mostly through the use of *super*natural creatures. Now obviously only the latter falls into the category of fantasy—human madness is, alas, all too real.

Beyond that, though, the term "dark fantasy" in its limited sense should evoke the kind of hybrid that its opposite, "light fantasy," does. Not just any horror novel, but one that truly incorporates the stuff of fantasy as well as the supernatural factors of supernatural fantasy. From the past, one evokes Clark Ashton Smith, whose nasty little dangers were such stuff as a

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garden of living, moving deadly flowers in a fantasy world.

Certainly a good contemporary example is *Heart of Midnight* by J. Robert King. Here is a fantasy city called Harmonia, in a world that might or might not be Earth, where among other fantastical elements roam werewolves. The hero is one Casimir, an ophan youth. The city is ruled by a "meistersinger" who Casimir knows to be his father and a werewolf to boot. Casimir's mother had been killed by his father when he discovered that she had been hiding the fact that the boy had inherited the curse. Casimir used his power to escape and now lives only to revenge himself on his father.

He discovers a patron, the mysterious Harkon Lukas, who enables him to enter the contest to determine who might be able to wrest the title of meistersinger from the current ruler. This is done by song and wit; Casimir wins and in the ensuing chaos when his father refuses to give up his office, Casimir forces him to shape change and kills him. This not only makes him meistersinger, but a hero as well.

All of this is only the initial part of the story, which chronicles Casimir's painful struggle with his affliction, and the way it affects his relationship with his best friend, Thoris, whom he has made priest of the god of music, and the beautiful aristocrat Julianna. And obviously there is more to the mysterious Lukas than meets the eye.

One regrets not getting more on Harmonia, which has been created with some original elements. And King is not yet the smoothest of writers. The story proceeds, either by accident or design, in an oddly shapeless way, which means that it goes off in unexpected directions (rather refreshing). However, nothing prepared me for the unexpected ending which by some miracle comes off.

Shoptalk

Anthologies, etc . . . Regular readers will know how politically incorrect I am in admiring the works of Rudyard Kipling; I am a passionate Kippler. (Old joke: "Do you like Kipling?" "I've never kippled.") Therefore I celebrate the publication of *Kipling's Science Fiction* and *Kipling's Fantasy Stories,* both presented by John Brunner. What a feast! I only question the exclusion of "The City of Dreadful Night" from the latter volume. Strictly, it's not fantasy, but is still one of the most atmospherically frightening stories I have ever read. But that's niggling. If you haven't kippled, and have something in the way of historical perspective, you'll find it wonderful, wonderful stuff. (Tor, $17.95 each)

Science fiction non-fiction . . . Here's a bit of esoterica that's obviously a labor of love. *The Jack Vance Lexicon (From Ahulph to Zipahgote): The Coined Words of Jack Vance* edited and with an introduction by Dan Temianka (Underwood Miller, $19.95. . . . And from the reblime to the subdiculous, there's *On Philip K. Dick:40 Articles From Science-Fiction Studies* which may be thirty-nine more articles than you really want, but which the Dickers will certainly welcome. It's edited by R.D. Mullen, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay,

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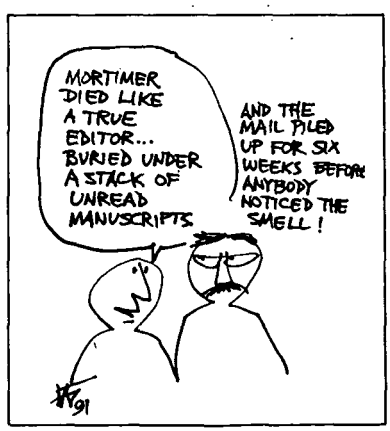
Jr., Arthur B. Evans, and Veronica Hollinge (Terra Haute & Greeencastle, for information Arthur B. Evans, East College, De Pauw University, IN 47115-0037, $16.95, paper).... Whatever became of cyberpunk? They laughed when I said it would be a passing fad of undefined boundaries. But I lived through the New Wave of twenty years back. (Wouldn't .you know that SF wasn't able to find an original soubriquet for its own avant-garde? It had to borrow a cinema term.) and watched it break and become part of the mainstream. (To follow this metaphor, shouldn't that be mainsea?—but I'm in too deep already.) "Cyberpunk" is not blazoned on book covers these days, a sure sign the publishers consider it no longer a selling point. Certainly one thing that happened was that the mass media picked it up and inevitably used it wrongly (that's going on the assumption that there was a right way to use it). In any case, to prove that nothing is out of date in academe, there's *Fiction 2000: Cyberpunk and the Future of Narrative*, edited by George Slusser and Tom Shippey (University of Georgia Press, $20, paper).

Sequels, prequels, series and whatnot.... The third adventure by Dan McGirt of that determined non-hero, Jason Cosmo, is out. It's *Dirty Work* and it's funnier than most of what passes for humor these days (Roc, $4.50, paper).... The third in Anne McCaffrey's "The Rowan" series is *Damia's Children* (Ace/Putnam, $21.95).... Douglas Adams' *Mostly Harmless* is subtitled "The fifth book in the increasingly inaccurately named Hitchikers trilogy" which should tell you all you need to know about *that* (Harmony Books, $20).... Chalk up another third, this one number three in William C. Dietz's speedy "Drifter" series, *Drifter's War* (Ace, $4.99, paper).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, **1393 rue La Fontaine, Montréal, Québec, H2L 1T6, Canada.** ●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NEXT ISSUE

Nebula and Hugo Award-winner **Nancy Kress** whose "Beggars in Spain" was the big story of 1991, returns to these pages next month with a compelling and powerful new novella, our lead story for July, "Dancing on Air." In this one, Kress gives us a look at the surprising future of one of the oldest of all the performing arts, and embroils us as well in a complex and suspenseful web of mystery, intrigue, passion, betrayal, and murder—this has everything, including a talking dog! What more could you want? Don't miss it.

ALSO IN JULY: critically acclaimed British author **Brian Stableford** takes us to a harrowing future for the story of a strange fugitive and the man who must decide whether or not to risk all to give her shelter, in "Carriers"; hot new writer **Mary Rosenblum** returns with another of her popular "Drylands" stories, this one a prequel to her novella "Stairway," which we published in May—the bittersweet and moving story of "The Rain Stone"; new writer **Robert Sampson** makes his *Asimov's* debut with the scary tale of man who has a frightening encounter with some "Dead Gods" who refuse to stay dead; **Lewis Shiner** returns after much too long an absence to take us to London at the tag end of the hip/gear/fab Swinging Sixties for a fascinating rendezvous with a "Voodoo Child"; **Jamil Nasir** gives us a chilling and yet oddly lyrical look at the End of Everything, in "Sleepers Awake"; and new writer **Wennicke Eide** makes her Asimov's debut with a compassionate study of a lonely woman who becomes obsessed with the "The Stone Man." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our July issue on sale on your newsstands on May 25, 1993, or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of our upcoming issues.

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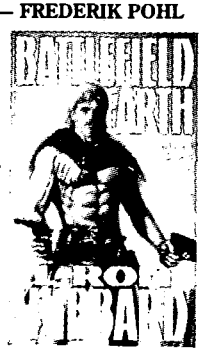

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

May used to offer a letup in con(vention)s, before the big Memorial Day weekend. No more. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and information about clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS (273-3297). If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. When phoning, give your name right off. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre.

APRIL 1993

30-May 2—**MarCon.** For info, write: **Box 211101, Columbus OH 43221.** Or phone: **(614) 475-0158 or 268-6322** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Columbus OH (if city omitted, same as in address). *Guests will include: none announced at press time. This big con usually draws over 1500.*

30-May 2—**ConDuit. (801) 273-0443 or 776-0164.** Salt Lake City UT. SF/fantasy; gaming emphasis.

30-May 2—**NameThatCon. (314) 256-8364 or 724-0808 or 946-9147.** Airport Hilton, St. Louis MO.

30-May 2—**UK Nat'l. Star Trek Con.** Pontins Middleton Tower Holiday Centre, Morecambe, Lancs.

MAY 1993

1-3—**AllianceCon. (59) 315-579.** Courmayeur Italy. Star Wars & media SF. Dates subject to change.

7-9—**Magic Carpet Con.** Holiday Inn, Dalton GA. A. Norton, S. Shwartz, P. Griffin.

7-9—**LepreCon. (602) 892-2837 or 968-7863 or 433-9624.** Phoenix AZ. Dates not firm at press time.

7-9—**FILKONtario.** Holiday Inn, Mississauga (near Toronto) ON. SF/fantasy folksinging convention.

14-16—**ConTraption, Box 2285, Ann Arbor MI 48106. (313) 261-3502.** Troy MI Somerset Inn. Cherryh.

14-16—**CanCon, Box 105, 220 Woodbridge Crs., Nepean ON K2B 8G1. (613) 726-9097.** Canadian SF.

14-16—***Kubla Khan, 647 Devon Dr., Nashville TN 37220. (615) 832-8402, 297-7195.*** *Steele, Offutt.*

14-16—**Oasis, Box 940992, Maitland FL 32792. (407) 725-2383.** Willis, Whelan, Bova, Haldemans.

21-23—**Corflu, Box 1624, Madison WI 53701. (608) 255-3396.** Inn on the Park. For fanzine fans.

21-23—**KeyCon, Box 3178, Winnipeg MB R3C 4E6.** Zelazny, Saberhagen, Eggleton, L. Ross-Mansfield.

21-23—**Ballad Trek, 39 Hanover, Asheville NC 28806. (704) 253-9981.** Strong science programming.

22-23—**Imagine That. (216) 923-8823.** Civic Center, Cobb County (near Atlanta) GA. Art exhibition.

SEPTEMBER 1993

2-6—**ConFrancisco, 712 Bancroft Rd. 1993, Walnut Creek CA 94598. (510) 945-1993.** WorldCon in SF.

SEPTEMBER 1994

1-5—**ConAdian, Box 2430, Winnipeg MB R3C 4A7. (204) 944-1998 (fax).** WorldCon. C$95/US$85.

AUGUST 1995

24-28—**Intersection, Box 15430, Washington DC 20003.** Glasgow UK. World SF Convention. US$65.

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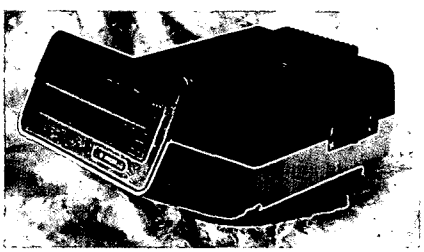

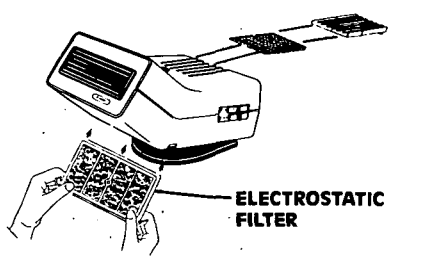

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